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CÉCILE'S FORTUNE.

I.

IT is a dark night and a tempest sways the lofty pines of the Esterel forest. Two men are slowly climbing a wooded hill, through briars and over rocks, and beneath a canopy of dark foliage. At almost every step they pause to look around them, and listen. They remind one of hunted wolves. They strain their eyes to pierce the gloom, and listen as though to distinguish, amid the confused noises of the forest, some sound they dread. And when the storm, growling in the ravines, bursts upon them like a hurricane, or gives a plaintive human-like moan, they at once throw themselves face downward on the damp heather.

But it is neither the darkness nor the storm they fear. The darkness conceals, the storm protects them, and as soon as they recognise the loud voice of the mistral, they again begin ascending the wild height. They reach the summit at last, quite breathless, and lean against the trunk of an ancient oak. It is impossible to advance any further. An impassable precipice yawns at their feet.

"I told you so," muttered one of the fugitives. "We shall never get out of this accursed wood."

"I am not anxious to get out of it too soon," replied his companion. "Daylight will soon come, and after sunrise it will not be prudent for us to be seen on the highways."

"We shall be no safer here. The forest-keepers will assist the gendarmes in beating the woods. They must have begun by now, for the entire neighbourhood has been warned. Two cannons have been fired to announce that two convicts have succeeded in making their escape. The peasants know the signal, and they are aware that they will receive a handsome reward if they capture us as will no doubt be the case."

"If you are afraid, go back to Toulon ; you will, perhaps, get off with fifty lashes."

"I'm not afraid, but it is now thirty-six hours since we made our escape in a boat belonging to one of the hospital purveyors, and twenty-four hours have been spent wandering about the woods in a neighbourhood we know nothing of."

" You may not know this part of the country, but I do and we are going to the Château of Mérindol."

" Present ourselves at a château ! You are mad."

" There is no one there to oppose our entrance. And we shall probably find a change of clothes there. The château used to be occupied."

" I begin to understand. We will dress ourselves afresh, burn our convict's clothes, and then we shall perhaps succeed in reaching the frontier, which is but a short distance off. Besides, we shall not want for money as I have our comrades' purse in my possession."

" The purse ! Yes, we will talk about that presently," muttered the taller and stronger of the two convicts.

" Is it far to this château ? " inquired the other.

" About three quarters of a league from here—to our right. I went there often enough in years past to find my way now with my eyes shut."

" Why did you not tell me so sooner ? "

" Because you would have refused to follow me. You would have thought I was merely inventing a story to deceive you. I tell it you now, and that ought to be enough, Monsieur Mongeorge."

" It is enough," replied the convict whom his companion had addressed as " Monsieur Mongeorge," with an ironical emphasis upon the word " Monsieur." " Come, Ricœur, show me the way."

" That is not necessary," growled Ricœur. " I can enter the den without your assistance. You will remain here on guard, this is a good place to see anyone coming. I will bring you all you need as a change of clothes."

" Very well, I will remain then. But make haste. If daylight overtook us—"

" Don't be alarmed ; I shall be back in an hour. But first of all we have an account to settle. You are carrying the purse our comrades intrusted to you. It is too heavy for you. Besides, we shall be obliged to separate. You wish to reach some foreign country, while I want to see Paris again ; some misfortune may happen to one of us, while the other may escape. It isn't worth while to have all the money lost, so let us divide it."

" But I swore to deliver our comrades' money to an appointed person—to deliver it myself. Having confidence in me they mutually agreed to furnish me with the means of making my escape. You and I were chained together, you profited by the opportunity to make your escape as well. I am glad of it, but I can't do what you ask."

" But I tell you I want my share."

" Your share ! You talk as if the money belonged to us. But you know that it is only a trust."

" Bosh ! such talk might hoodwink judges, but it does not take with me. Give me half the money or—I shall take it from you by force."

"Take care, Ricoeur. If you rob our comrades, they will be sure to have their revenge."

"I'm not afraid of them. I am going to change my skin, and enter a circle where they will never think of looking for me. Besides, all that is my affair. You need not trouble yourself about me. I do not ask what you intend to do."

"Oh, if I escape the gendarmes, I shall try to earn my living honestly. I have had enough of a convict's life, and have no desire to try it again."

"No more have I. But I have no foolish prejudices, and providing I make money I don't mind the means. You make me laugh with your scruples. An escaped convict who tries to live honestly, is sure to starve and to be recaptured sooner or later. I should like to know how you would manage to get a situation. People will be sure to ask you where you come from, and who you are. Shall you tell them that you were once a notary, and that you have just spent ten years at Toulon?"

"No," muttered Mongeorge, overcome by the pitiless logic of his companion, "I foresee that every door will be closed against me, but I know one person who will lend me a helping hand, and assist me in beginning life afresh."

"Don't rely on that. When a man is in trouble, his friends desert him ; money's the only thing to help a chap along, and we should be fools not to divide the contents of your belt. Besides, I've made up my mind to make a fortune. With a title, some foreign decorations, and plenty of bounce, one can aspire to anything. But I must have a little money to start with, and you can supply it. Let us settle this matter now, once for all. Unfasten the belt under your blouse, count the cash it contains, and let us share the amount like two brothers."

"Never ! I can give you a little of the money, and take a little for myself. Our comrades authorized me to draw on the deposit for our first expenses ; but I promised to take the rest to—"

"To a thief who has become a banker, and invests convicts' money for them. And you pretend that you mean to be an honest man ! How was this money you guard so carefully, obtained ? It was stolen from the manager of the hospital, as you know very well. So, enough of those virtuous grimaces, old fellow ! Give me half of the plunder, and do what you like with the rest."

"I shall give you nothing. You are quite capable of killing me no doubt, but I would rather die than betray the friends who helped me to make my escape. It is no question whether this money was stolen or not. I have received a deposit, I am determined to hand it to the proper party, and you sha'n't touch it."

"Say that you wish to keep it for yourself. Ah ! you are not such a simpleton as I supposed. Well, we will say no more about it at present, and you had better accompany me to the Château de Mérindol. I have changed my mind. If we separate, we shall perhaps lose time. When our expedition has proved successful, we

will resume the conversation, and I shall, perhaps, be able to convert you to my way of thinking."

"I fancy not ; but I am ready to accompany you."

The two convicts then started off along the edge of the precipice. The wind had fallen. The tempest was raging at a distance. The fugitives had scarcely taken a dozen steps, when Ricœur, suddenly springing upon his companion, caught him round the waist and hurled him into the abyss below. Mongeorge gave vent to a frightful shriek which the echoes of the forest repeated. That was all. The murderer leant over the precipice, but he did not hear the slightest sound. Ricœur was well acquainted with that part of the country, and he was aware that at a short distance ahead of him, he would find a path leading to the bottom of the ravine in which his victim was lying, in all probability dead. This path was very rough, and in the darkness, even dangerous ; but the murderer was sure-footed, and he reached the bottom of the cliff without any mishap.

Ricœur cautiously advanced, his hands outstretched, and his wolf-like eyes straining in the vain hope of penetrating the darkness that filled the abyss. The briars caught in his clothes. He trembled each time he found himself arrested by their thorns, or whenever a bird, awakened by his tread, flew by, touching his face.

However, he advanced, and in ten minutes or so, he stumbled over something on the ground. Mongeorge lay motionless upon the stony heather. Ricœur had almost trampled him under foot. The murderer soon recovered from his sudden terror and surprise ; he knelt down and placed his hand upon the chest of the prostrate man. Mongeorge's heart had not yet ceased to beat, but he was quite unconscious. Ricœur lifted his companion's blouse, and unfastened a broad leather belt which he wore next his body.

"That's all right," muttered the murderer. "There is enough here to start me in the circle I mean to live in." Then having thrust the belt in the pocket of his baggy, coarse linen trousers he added : "Still, there is something else I need, a change of clothes ; but I shall find what I want at the château, and it won't cost me a penny to dress myself in the latest style. Heaven grant that that fool of a Mérindol hasn't taken it into his head to spend the winter at his place. The fellow always was peculiar ; but at this season of the year he must be at Monaco, gambling away his last coppers ! Besides, if I find him in my way—well, so much the worse for him. I'll cure him of appetite for good !"

This soliloquy lasted until Ricœur regained the path by which he had descended into the ravine. He climbed it with difficulty, and just as he reached the top of the height, he fancied he heard a horse's tread. He turned in alarm, and at the other end of the gorge perceived a speck of light seemingly in motion. This light evidently came from a lantern, which was probably carried either by some belated traveller or a forest keeper making his round. Any meeting was to be dreaded, so Ricœur hastened at the top of his speed

towards the Château of Mérindol which he wished to visit before sunrise.

Scarcely had he disappeared in the forest, than a rider, preceded by a man on foot, who carried a lantern in his hand, reached the entrance of the ravine. "Not that way, Monsieur Louis," said the pedestrian. "If you enter that gorge which we call the Bat's Hole your horse won't be able to get out of it. The road to Mérindol is to the right."

"I know that, Piganiou," replied the rider, "but we are in no hurry, and I want to know who gave the cry we heard just now. Perhaps someone has fallen into the ravine, and needs our assistance."

"Impossible, Monsieur Louis. In such weather and at this hour, there can be no one in the forest except ourselves. It must have been a fox."

"A fox? nonsense! It was a man, I tell you, a man who has fallen into the ravine. He must have lost his way; he was not familiar with the part, and did not see the precipice in the dark. Let us go on. We shall only have to retrace our steps."

The speaker was a tall young man, who sat his sorry-looking steed with an air of ease, and his companion was a squat elderly fellow, a trifle bent, who trudged on with his head lowered, like the peasant that he was.

"You were right, sir," suddenly exclaimed Piganiou, the peasant; "here is a fellow lying on his back. He looks as though he had fallen over the precipice."

"I was sure of it," cried the young man, springing nimbly to the ground; "if I had listened to you the poor fellow would have perished here for want of a helping hand."

"He is past all human aid, I think."

"We will see about that. Set your lantern down and help me to lift him up."

Piganiou immediately knelt down, and cast the light of his lantern on the prostrate body. "Good heavens," muttered the old peasant. "Look at this red blouse and green cap—the fellow's an escaped convict!"

"Yes," said his master, bending forward. "He was hiding in the forest, and tried to make his escape in the darkness, but the earth suddenly gave way beneath his feet."

"Ah, well, there is no great harm done. There is one rascal less in the world, that's all. But—no, look, he moves a little and puffs. However, he is as good as dead. It will be all over with him in an hour's time."

"Who knows? Perhaps he is only stunned. Help me to get him on my horse. I'm not going to leave him here."

"But he is a convict, sir."

"A convict is a man. I sha'n't leave him here to die when it will not take us more than half an hour to get him to Mérindol."

"To the château! under the roof of the deceased marquis, your father! Oh! Monsieur Louis, you surely won't do that?"

"That is exactly what *I am* going to do. And my father would have done the same under similar circumstances."

"But the gendarmes must certainly be looking for him ; and if he were found in the château—"

"He won't be found there. Come, come, take hold of him, under his arms. I will take him by the legs, and between us we will get him on to the saddle, and secure him with the straps that fasten my portmanteau. Besides, I'll support him. You can lead the horse, we shall have to go slowly, that's all."

"Ah ! Monsieur Louis, one has to do whatever you wish," sighed Piganou. "But if any misfortune befalls you on this scoundrel's account, it won't be my fault, and you must remember that I advised you not to touch him."

"Oh ! certainly, certainly. Are you ready ?" asked the master, slipping his hands under the legs of the unconscious man.

The servant very reluctantly decided to obey, and the convict, lifted by the two strong men, was placed on the horse's back, face downward, and secured with a surcingle. The master held his head to prevent it swaying, and Piganou, already provided with his lantern, was about to take hold of the bridle when the convict groaned :

"You have killed me, Ricœur—but God will punish you."

"Did you hear that, Monsieur Louis ?" cried Piganou. "That name of Ricœur—it was that of the scoundrel who began your father's ruin."

"Ricœur ?" repeated the young man. "Yes, I recollect. A man of that name was a broker to whom my father intrusted certain business transactions, and who disappeared, taking part of our fortune with him."

"Which he obtained possession of by forgery," added the peasant. "Perhaps you don't know that he succeeded in escaping to Italy, where he squandered the money he had stolen from your family ; but he afterwards returned to France and began coining counterfeit money. He was then caught and sent to the galley for life. He was still there last summer. I saw him at Toulon dragging a ball and chain about the arsenal wharf."

"The rascal only got what he deserved. But why do you tell me all this just now ?"

"Why, this Ricœur must have escaped in company with the man you are trying to save."

"Perhaps so—perhaps he flung his companion into the Bat's Hole. That exclamation just now was a charge of foul play. However, that is no reason why we should abandon this poor devil here."

"But Ricœur is capable of any crime, sir. If he really tried to kill this man, he can't be far off, and if he met us in the forest—"

"Well, we should be two to one."

"Oh ! he's as strong as four ordinary men. You must have seen him years ago ; but you no doubt don't recollect him, as you were still a child when he decamped with your father's money. But he knows you. Would you believe it, on the day I met him at

Toulon he recognised me instantly, and actually had the assurance to speak to me."

"Were you intimate with him in former years?"

"No, I always thought him a rascal, and I did not hesitate to say what I thought of him. But Monsieur le Marquis was too kind-hearted and credulous. He wouldn't listen to me, and his refusal cost him dear. I saw Ricœur at the château often enough, however, and when we met at Toulon the rascal inquired how my wife and children were getting on; strangest of all, he wanted to know what had become of you. He asked if you were rich, and if you spent the whole year at Mérindol. I did not tell him much, as you may suppose, Monsieur Louis, not liking to have your name brought into a conversation with a convict."

"I should think not," replied Louis de Mérindol, laughing. "However, I don't see that I have any reason to fear this scoundrel."

"But you forget that he is now at liberty, and that the idea of entering the château may occur to him. He knows that it is only a short distance from here, and that it is unoccupied."

"If he is so well informed, he must also know that he would find nothing worth stealing there. Mérindol is the abode of poverty, and I don't believe there is even a bottle of wine left in the cellar. I drank the last ones when I was here last summer with my two friends from Paris. Nice friends they were. They are not likely to repeat their visit. I have come down to my last resources, so my society will have no further charms for them."

"So much the better, Monsieur Louis; the Parisians have never done you anything but harm, and if you had never seen them you would still have enough left to rebuild Mérindol, and live there happily."

"Yes, if I had the courage to turn miller like you, but the will is lacking. I don't like the country, and I like solitude even less. I need the bustle and stir of Paris. I have lived there as the rich live. Now that I have nothing left, I shall lead there the life of those who toil, and I sha'n't be wretched on that account."

While this conversation was going on, the convict had begun to give fresh signs of life; such as sighs, moans, and convulsive movements. The jolting seemed to have aroused him from his lethargic condition. A considerable distance had already been covered. The ravine was a long way behind, and the wooded slope was expanding into a plateau. "Ah! Monsieur Louis," said Piganiou, "this idea of taking an escaped convict to your father's house is a very bad one. What do you mean to do with him?"

"Cure him first, and you shall assist me in doing so. You have not your equal as a nurse, as I have reason to know."

"It is true that I set you on your legs more than once when you had had a bad fall from your horse while galloping over roads where the fiend himself would break his neck. I have remedies of my own, which are better than doctor's stuff. But even if I set this

convict all right he would be no better off. What could you do with him afterwards?"

"I do not know yet, but I certainly sha'n't hand him over to the gendarmes."

"But you cannot keep him at Mérindol."

"No, as I shall only remain there twenty-four hours to get some papers and family relics which I don't wish to abandon. I must intrust the task of saving this poor beggar to you. As soon as he is able to walk, you must take him at night-time to your mill at Reyran, dress him in your journeyman's clothes, and then go with him to Fréjus, where you can take the train for Nice."

"Bless me ! Monsieur Louis, but this man would be recognised as an escaped convict anywhere. The first gendarme we meet will arrest him, and me with him."

"Then you can let him go alone. Your wife would be too wretched if you were arrested. However, you certainly must shelter this fellow until he can decamp with safety, and then you must supply him with a disguise and such information as will prevent him from going astray."

"Ah ! Monsieur Louis, you are always the same. Your kind heart will be the ruin of you."

"Very possibly ; but I can't help it. This man was no doubt guilty of some ugly things in past years, but he has, perhaps, repented. Besides, I don't believe in chance, Piganiou. I believe that the hand of Providence is apparent in everything, and if I happened to pass near the Bat's Hole just as this poor devil was pitched headlong into it, it was because Providence wishes me to save him."

"Upon my word, Monsieur Louis, you have a skilful way of putting things. Ah ! you would have made a capital lawyer."

"That was my true vocation, perhaps ; but my father had very decided opinions upon that point, as upon many others. He only allowed me to enter the Polytechnic School on condition that I would not accept any position under government afterwards. I needed no urging to send in my resignation as an engineering cadet, as I only wanted to amuse myself, and the result is that I find myself, at the age of thirty, without money, and without a position that would enable me to make any. Still, I have now decided to work courageously—"

"That is a wise resolution, Monsieur Louis," sighed the miller, "only you must allow me to say you begin foolishly. This runaway—"

"Silence, you stubborn fellow. It is too late to draw back now. I can see the battlements of Mérindol rising above the pines. All I possess in the world is that old pile, where I shall never set foot again : having come to visit it for the last time I should like it to be the scene of a charitable act."

A black mass indeed stood out against the sky on the outskirt of the forest, where, on a kind of plateau, the ancestors of this impoverished young nobleman had, in days long past, built themselves a feudal manor.

"Good heavens! Monsieur Louis," Piganiou suddenly exclaimed, "there is a light in the lower hall. That brigand, Ricœur, has entered the château as I expected. He hurried there after getting rid of his brother convict, and as he is still there, we shall have trouble with him."

"I doubt it. If it is really Ricœur who has lighted the lamp or candle we see burning there, he will take good care to decamp as soon as he perceives your lantern."

"Taking everything he can lay his hands on away with him."

"Oh! some worn-out shooting jackets and rusty old guns? I don't mind that. Let us make haste, and don't be afraid. If the bird hasn't flown when we reach the château, I will make him take flight."

Piganiou heaved a deep sigh, and raised his hands despairingly to heaven, but he obeyed his young master, nevertheless. The storm was over, the sky was clearing in the east, and the wind wafted the sullen roar of the waves as they broke upon the rocks of Cape Roux. The coast was only a short distance off, for the wooded hill, capped by the Château of Mérindol, rose from the beach between the Bay of St. Raphael and the Bay of La Napoule. It was one of the spurs of Mont-Vinaigre. The two convicts, escaping from Toulon in a stolen boat, had left the roads amid the height of a terrible tempest, and after a perilous voyage, a westerly wind had driven them in the middle of the night on to the sandy shore of the little Bay of Agay. It seemed probable, therefore, that Ricœur had not formed his plan till chance had landed him in a neighbourhood with which he was familiar. The château in which he proposed to procure a change of clothes looked well enough from a distance, with its square keep, its two round towers and massive walls, behind which there was a dwelling-house of less ancient date; it had indeed been erected in the reign of Louis XIII. However, the lordly warlike pile was now crumbling to dust, and even the Louis XIII. dwelling-house only contained three or four habitable rooms. There was but little furniture left; three or four dilapidated bedsteads, as many worm-eaten wardrobes, a few unsteady tables, and a limited number of ragged arm-chairs. Still, there were some cooking utensils and some crockery; and even art was represented by two large, broadly painted portraits recalling Rigaud's style: one of them represented an Admiral de Mérindol, who had been killed in an engagement in the Indian Ocean when under the orders of the Bailli de Suffren, and the other a Brigadier-General Mérindol of the time of Louis XV., these being the most illustrious members of the family in modern times.

Louis de Mérindol, the last of his race, had come to the château for the express purpose of taking away these portraits, together with his title-deeds, land grants, dating from the time of the Crusades, genealogies carefully drawn up by d'Hozier, and other parchments of a similar nature. He had left them at the old château while he was leading the feverish wandering life of a

prodigal, but this life was now ended, and he did not wish to offend his ancestors by abandoning these mementos of a brilliant past.

They had been left too long already in this dilapidated mansion with no one to guard them, for Piganiou, the old family servant, resided at his mill near Reyran, at least twelve miles away. He kept the keys of the château, and visited it occasionally, but he seldom sojourned there. He was a married man, with two daughters. He had purchased the mill which his ancestors had managed for the lords of Mérindol for three hundred years, and he was now independent; but he was greatly attached to the son of his former master, and that very night he had given another proof of his disinterested devotion. Louis had dropped down upon the Piganiou household that evening in the most unexpected manner on his return from a disastrous trip to Homburg; and the faithful miller had complied with his request to guide him through the forest to the château, for Louis had but a poor recollection of the roads. It is true, that Piganiou had not foreseen the strange adventure that had since occurred, and perhaps he was now half inclined to regret that he had engaged in the undertaking.

"Look, Monsieur Louis," he remarked, again pausing, "the light is on the second floor now, in the room you occupied last summer."

"Yes, I see. It is very strange," murmured the young man. "Who can have taken the notion to trouble the bats and owls? See, there is a shadow moving across the window. I positively have a tenant. Ah! but now the light disappears. My tenant is leaving without having paid his rent. Ah, well! so much the better; we shall find the coast clear."

"And the house, too, probably. He only came to steal, of course," said Piganiou tugging at the bridle of the horse which soon reached the edge of the moat surrounding the castle—a moat, which was now dry, and perhaps had never been full of water, for in this land of Provence, rain seldom or never falls.

The drawbridge which had formerly spanned the moat was no longer in existence; but the parapets had so crumbled away, filling the cavity, that there was no difficulty in crossing. No trace of the portcullis or postern remained; and this once proud fortress, which had successfully resisted the assaults of the Huguenots and the attacks of the Spaniards when they invaded Provence under Charles V. could now be entered as easily as Piganiou's mill at Reyran. The battlemented gateway led into a narrow courtyard, at the end of which stood the house, a long tile-covered building, which looked much more like a barn than a nobleman's mansion. The light which had been seen on the first floor had now disappeared, and the only audible sound was the rustling of the pines in the forest near by. "Let us go in," said Louis de Mérindol, and seeing Piganiou hesitate, he went forward to the main entrance.

It was only necessary to push the door open, for the old lock had

been broken, probably by a vigorous push. "What did I tell you?" exclaimed the miller. "The scoundrel forced the door!"

"It could not have cost him much of an effort," murmured Louis de Mérindol; "and I suppose he did not find it much more difficult to make his escape by scaling the north wall. Come on and hand me the lantern." Piganiou obeyed, though rather reluctantly. His master took the lantern, and entered the lower hall. "You are right," he exclaimed, "some one has been here. And our visitor felt the need of refreshment, it would seem. There is a bottle partially emptied and a glass on the table. I thought there was nothing left at Mérindol but water. No," he added, after smelling the glass. "It is rum. The last of the bottles I brought when I came here last summer. The rascal must be a sharp fellow to have succeeded in unearthing it. He probably did not confine his depredations to this. I am curious to see what he has taken; but first of all we must attend to our wounded man."

Mérindol and the miller between them succeeded in laying the convict on a camp-bedstead which stood in the apartment. The man groaned frightfully; but this was a good omen, as it showed that he was beginning to regain consciousness. At last Louis poured a few drops of rum into his mouth, and the convict then opened his eyes, and asked huskily: "Where am I?"

"You are with people who don't wish you any harm," replied Mérindol. "We found you in a ravine in the forest; and if we have taken the trouble to bring you here, it is certainly not to deliver you up to the gendarmes."

"The gendarmes," repeated the fugitive, trying to sit up, "then you know—"

"That you have escaped from Toulon? Unquestionably. You still wear your red blouse and green cap, and between you and me, you would not be able to go far in this garb. So it is very fortunate that you tumbled into the Bat's Hole as the ravine is called, especially as you have broken no limbs."

"No," muttered the injured man, stretching his arms, and moving his legs. "It is my head that struck the ground and my woollen cap broke the force of the fall. Ah! it would have been better if I had been killed!"

"Why? One should never regret being alive. If you were dead you would have no opportunity to atone for the past—a past that you regret, I am sure."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Mongeorge.

"Very well, that is all I care to know just now on that point, but tell me how this accident occurred?"

"It was not an accident. I was pushed over the precipice by—a man who—escaped with me."

"Ah! and why did he wish to get rid of you?"

The convict hesitated, but finally with an effort he replied: "To rob me."

"What! you had some money, then?"

Mongeorge did not reply. He covered his face with his hands, and began to weep. Piganiou muttered between his set teeth, and shrugged his shoulders impatiently ; but Louis de Mérindol pitied this man, bowed down beneath his burden of shame, and said gently : “ Don’t be afraid to confess the truth. I pledge you my word that whatever you tell me shall go no further.”

“ You give *me* your word of honour, me—a miserable, branded scamp. Ah, sir, I do not deserve it ! Whatever the consequences may be I will tell you all. I have been a convict for five years, chained to a man I loathed. I accepted my sentence to imprisonment for life as a just punishment for the crime I had been guilty of, and the idea of attempting to evade it never occurred to me. You don’t know, perhaps, that convicts sometimes conspire to insure the escape of one of their number. Each has his chance, his day by turn, and when that day comes the others incur any risk in helping him. My turn had not yet come ; I had not dragged my ball and chain after me long enough, but something occurred which brought me into favourable notice. A robbery was committed in the office of the hospital manager—a large sum of money was taken from the safe and secreted in a spot only known to the parties who had stolen it.”

“ I heard something about that affair,” exclaimed Piganiou. “ All Toulon has been talking about it, and though all the convicts were soundly flogged, none ever revealed the whereabouts of the money.”

“ No ; it was effectually concealed,” replied Mongeorge ; “ but the thieves wished to place it where it would be safe beyond any possible doubt. They have an accomplice in Paris, a man who pretends to carry on an honourable business, but who is really the convicts’ banker. They wished to send him the twenty-nine thousand francs they had stolen but not one of them had any confidence in his accomplices. I myself was but little acquainted with them ; they knew that I did not sympathize with them, and they had always ridiculed me unsparingly, still, it was upon me that their choice fell.”

“ Precisely ; because they knew that you did not resemble them. Such men have a wonderful gift for reading character. So they made proposals to you ?”

“ They told me that if I would promise upon oath to take the stolen money to Paris, and deliver it into the keeping of an individual they would name, they would all unite in furnishing me with the means of escape.”

“ It was certainly a tempting offer.”

“ It ought not to have been one, for by accepting the custody of this money, I made myself their accomplice. God is my witness that I hesitated a long time, but I was finally coward enough to accept.”

“ I really can’t blame you. When a man is condemned to imprisonment for life, he isn’t likely to neglect any opportunity to regain his liberty.”

" If it had been for my own sake alone, I think I should have refused ; but I had a reason for being extremely anxious to return to Paris—a reason I cannot explain to you, though I assure you it is one for which I have no cause to blush. I therefore consented to the proposal, and the same day I received a file, and was taught how to sever the chain which bound me to my companion. He was not to escape with me. The others distrusted him, but by chance we got off together. The chain was filed so that it would yield to the first strain brought upon it ; but it still held together well enough to deceive the eyes of our guards. I was to leave the arsenal the next morning, dressed like a naval surgeon. My disguise was ready, and a belt containing the stolen money was already secreted under my blouse. I had been at work all day with my squad near the shore. It was getting dark, and we were loading some stones which our companions had taken from a quarry, when suddenly a bank fell in, crushing three convicts and burying a superintendent. Everyone rushed forward to dig away the soil that covered him. A sailing boat was moored close by in charge of two sailors, who immediately sprang on shore to assist in the rescue, and in the confusion we were forgotten. 'Come,' said Ricœur to me."

" Ricœur, that was your companion's name, I suppose ? " said Mérindol.

" Yes. He dragged me along with him, and the leaders of the conspiracy did not try to hinder our flight, though they were not pleased to see Ricœur leave with me ; but if they had denounced him, it would have cost them their money, for I had it on my person, and I should have been searched. Well, the darkness enabled us to get out of the roads without being seen, and the westerly wind, which was blowing stiff, bore us swiftly on. Ricœur knew something about sailing, and he was familiar with the coast. We finished filing our fetters asunder, and I helped him in keeping the boat out at sea, for we feared being caught along the coast. After twenty-four hours' anxiety and peril, the tempest drove us upon a rocky shore, where our boat was shivered to pieces, while we managed to land."

" And then you plunged into the forest. Why on earth didn't your companion, who knew something of navigation, you say, try to reach Italy ? "

" That was what I wanted him to do ; but he pretended that it was impossible. I found out afterwards that he was very anxious to land here. He wished to visit a deserted château in this direction—the Château of Mérindol."

" That is where you are now. Chance has brought you to the very place your companion wanted to reach."

" Good heavens ! Then Ricœur is here ? The owner of the château is absent, isn't he ? "

" He has been away a long time."

" Ricœur knew it ; and it was this fact that induced him to come and steal some clothes."

" He may have found some, but he certainly did not stop to try them on. If he came here at all, he must be some distance off by this time, and if he should take it into his head to return, we will give him a warm reception. But please go on with your story. Do you know that you were lucky to escape being arrested by the coastguards."

" The storm probably compelled them to seek shelter. Besides, they could not suppose that smugglers would think of landing in a tempest violent enough to keep a ship of war in port. At all events, we saw no one, so we immediately began to ascend the wooded slopes that extend almost to the beach. I was nearly exhausted, and frightfully hungry, but Ricceur urged me on, telling me that before daybreak we should reach the cabin of a woodcutter of his acquaintance, and that this man would procure some food for us, and allow us to remain for a time in his hut. I knew nothing about this part of the country, and was entirely at Ricceur's mercy, so I followed him, until, after several hours' tramping, we reached the summit of a precipitous hill. I was fainting with fatigue, and Ricceur told me that I could stretch myself out on the ground and sleep, while he went to an unoccupied house to procure some clothes for us. I realised the necessity of changing our costume before we attempted to cross the frontier ; but Ricceur wanted something more ; he wanted me to give him half of the money his comrades had entrusted to my care. At first I tried to induce him to listen to reason. I explained to him that this money was a sacred trust, for we owed our liberty to those who had confided it to my keeping, and that if we betrayed the trust, they would certainly have their revenge on us sooner or later. But it was of no use. He ridiculed my scruples, and finally resorting to stratagem, he pretended he would not insist any further, and asked me to accompany him to Mérindol. I allowed myself to be deceived by his hypocritical airs, and managed to drag myself along beside him for a short distance. It was then that he sprang upon me when I least expected it, and, seizing me round the body, flung me into the ravine. In my fall I lost consciousness."

" But the brigand must have robbed you of your money after that ? Do you remember nothing about it ?"

" Nothing ; but the belt has certainly gone," murmured the convict.

" Of course. Ricceur took good care not to leave it in your possession."

" Oh, I have no hopes of recovering it. I did not regain consciousness until a long time after my fall ; in fact, not until I reached this château. The liquor revived me."

" Drink a glassful to complete the cure," said Piganiou, pouring out a bumper.

The convict just moistened his lips with the rum, and then stammered a few words of thanks which touched Mérindol deeply. " Come, come," said the kind-hearted young nobleman, " your limbs

are not broken, and if your brain were injured, you could not talk so easily. It really seems hard to believe in such a miracle. Hold a light for me, Piganiou, and let me examine the effects of this remarkable fall more carefully."

The miller took up the lantern and raised it to the face of the injured man. His forehead was bloody, his cheeks badly bruised, there was a gash across his chin, while his eyes were so terribly swollen that they seemed to be bursting from their sockets. Thus disfigured, the face of the wounded man was frightful to look upon, and yet he had a kindly frank expression. "Come," said Mérindol, after examining him carefully, "I am sure now that your accident will have no serious consequences, and I see, with pleasure, that you have not a convict's face by any means. What was your trouble?"

"Forgery," said Mongeorge, huskily.

"The deuce! But it seems to me that the law does not usually punish forgery by hard labour for life."

"I was a notary, and I was accused of forging a will."

"You were unjustly accused, perhaps?" The fugitive hung his head and made no reply. "You are guilty, then?" inquired Mérindol, frowning.

"Yes, sir."

"It is better to admit it than to tell a falsehood."

"I was guilty, but if you only knew the strange circumstances that led me to commit such a crime; if you only knew my motive. I wished to repair an act of shameful injustice."

"Take care," interrupted Mérindol; "you will spoil all the good effect of your frankness. I am not your judge, but a man who thinks that all transgressions may be expiated, and who believes in your repentance. I have helped you out of a nasty predicament, and as I am naturally stubborn, I intend to save you altogether. This good man here will see to it out of regard for me. You will remain here until this evening—no one will think of looking for you here—and then you will go off with Piganiou, who will take you to his mill, a couple of leagues from here. There he will furnish you with a suitable disguise, and in a few days we shall find a way to get you safely out of France."

"Oh, sir, how can I ever prove my gratitude to you?"

"Very easily. You have only to earn an honest living. That is all I ask of you, and it certainly is not requiring too much. No oaths!" added Mérindol, checking the fugitive's protestations with a gesture. "Promises are of very little value, and I shall not be with you to see if you keep yours, for it is not likely that we shall ever meet again. So it is agreed. Not another word now respecting your past. But I have no objections to your telling me something more about the scoundrel who treated you so badly—about this Ricœur. He saw me years ago, when I was a child, and he came here often. Piganiou knows him. You say that he meant to come to Mérindol to-night to procure some clothes; and, indeed,

he must have carried this project into execution, for on approaching the house we saw a light first on this floor, and afterwards on the one above. The light disappeared at last, and the scoundrel has undoubtedly decamped ; but I should like to know what he has taken with him. Light me upstairs, Piganiou."

The miller, lantern in hand, preceded his young master up a winding staircase, and Mongeorge watched them go off with evident anxiety, for he feared that Ricœur would spring upon him from some hiding place and despatch him. An exclamation from the floor above soon turned his thoughts into another channel, however. "Ah ! the scoundrel has taken the portraits !" cried Piganiou.

It was the truth. The portraits of the admiral and the brigadier-general had both disappeared, but the empty frames were there. Mérindol was fairly stupefied. "Yes," he murmured at last, "the canvas has been cut out with some sharp instrument—probably with this razor—left here on the table. It must have been Ricœur who did it. But what on earth can he want with my family portraits ?"

"Perhaps he intends to sell them," replied Piganiou.

"No one would buy them of him. No bric-à-brac dealer would give him fifteen francs for the smoky old pictures. The man must be mad."

"Not so mad, I think, as other articles seem to be missing. See the clothes which were hanging on the pegs there have gone."

"Yes ; a shooting-suit of bottle-green velvet and a grey felt hat are missing. If Ricœur intends to travel in that costume he will not go far. Every one will take him for a brigand, and they will be right."

"Oh ! he has money enough to purchase a new outfit in the first town he comes to."

"But all this does not explain why he took the portraits."

"Good heavens ! that isn't all," exclaimed Piganiou. "Look, Monsieur Louis ; he has broken open the escritoire."

Mérindol turned hastily, and perceived that the dilapidated article of furniture referred to had been literally hacked to pieces. The hatchet which had been used for the purpose was still lying on the floor beside it. "Oh, ho !" said the young man, "the rascal has appropriated my deeds and papers. He seems to be a collector of portraits and parchments. Perhaps he hoped to find something besides old paper though ?"

"No, Monsieur Louis, he knew very well that there was no money here. The scoundrel wishes to pass himself off for you."

"He can't do that. In the first place, he must be fifteen or twenty years older than myself."

"That makes no difference. He does not intend to remain in France. He will go to some foreign country where you are not known, declare that he is the Marquis de Mérindol, and no one will be able to contradict him. He will take advantage of your name to commit new crimes.

"An agreeable prospect, truly ! But what can I do to prevent it?"

"Why, we will go to Fréjus. The grey mare is tired, but she will go all the same when she has had a good feed. You can ride her. I will walk. I would willingly tramp forty miles to capture Ricœur. At Fréjus we will inform the gendarmes ; the station-master will telegraph in every direction, and the scoundrel will soon be caught."

"Very good ! But how about the other man ? I told him that I would save him, and I cannot deliver him up."

"Then let him go wherever he likes. Besides, Monsieur Louis, you can't save this fellow, if you denounce his companion. The gendarmes have, of course, been warned of the escape of two convicts. If they capture one, they will want the other."

"I know it, and for that very reason, I have decided to denounce neither of them."

"Then you are willing that Ricœur should dishonour your name?"

"I don't think he will succeed in doing so. If he decides to remain in France, he won't be mistaken for a Mérindol. In the first place, I am very well known, and secondly, Ricœur couldn't pass himself off for a gentleman. If he thinks of operating in foreign parts, I can afford to laugh at him. He may swindle the inhabitants of the Argentine Republic, or marry a Chilian heiress by exhibiting the portraits of my ancestors, it matters little to me. I am anxious not to betray a poor devil who relies upon me to save him. Somehow or other, I fancy his crime was attended by extenuating circumstances. I will make him tell me his story presently."

"Well, sir, when he is once out of France, I trust you will do something to prevent Ricœur from using your papers. There mustn't be two Mérindols in the world, a true one and a false one ?"

"There will never be but one, for if I ever happen to find the scamp passing himself off for me, I shall have no difficulty in making him surrender a name that does not belong to him ; but in the meantime I shall not be a Mérindol. I only possess the six thousand francs I have in my pocket, and this château, which would not fetch a hundred louis, if I tried to sell it. When a man is reduced to such straits, he is no longer a marquis—no longer a Mérindol. There are two courses for me to pursue : either to blow out my brains, which would be an act of cowardice, or to endeavour to retrieve my fortunes by honest work, which I have determined to do. I am about to begin a new life. I have told the few friends I still possess of my speedy departure for New Zealand, they will soon forget me, and will never expect to see me again. They are right ; Louis de Mérindol is dead, but Louis Bertin, the mining engineer, has just begun life, and will find some employment in England."

"You intend to leave your country and change your name ? Ah, Monsieur Louis, if I need only sell my mill to save you from that—"

"Thanks, Piganiou ; I know that you would give me all you possess, if I asked you for it, and I shall always be deeply grateful to you

for your devotion ; but my mind is made up. I shall soon be only a toiler, and I shall not resume my name until I have made a fortune that will enable me to bear it with proper dignity."

"And I shall never more hear from you ? I sha'n't even know where you are?"

"Oh, yes ! I will write to you. But on condition, that you tell nobody what has become of me. I wish people to suppose me dead. Do not be alarmed. I have a presentiment that I shall be restored to life again, and return to my country. Who knows ? Perhaps I shall bring back money enough to rebuild the château."

"Heaven hear you, Monsieur Louis !" sighed the old servant, shaking his head. "But all the same, I can't believe that you are so easily reconciled to the loss of your family relics, especially as you had just made this long journey for the express purpose of removing them."

"I might have saved myself the trouble," replied Mérindol, laughing. "This will teach me not to indulge again in such weakness, for it certainly is a weakness to attach so much value to patents of nobility when one has to renounce one's title and assume a new name. But we are forgetting the man downstairs. He must be dying of fear in the dark. I want to hear his confession, and this evening you must oblige me by taking him to a place of safety. A good action at the beginning of my new career will bring me good luck."

When the master and servant returned to the hall below, they found the convict standing. "So you are on your legs again, I see," said Mérindol. "Now there will be no difficulty in getting you safely out of the country. You can rely upon being on the other side of the frontier to-morrow. But, before I do any more for you, I must know the story of your life. Tell it me."

"My story," repeated the fugitive, hanging his head. "Ah, do not ask me to relate that, sir !"

"Why not ?" replied Mérindol. "You just told me that you were convicted of forgery. You will probably have nothing worse than that to tell me, and perhaps your explanation will extenuate your fault. What are you afraid of ? I have certainly shown myself a lenient judge."

"Too lenient. I am not worthy of your compassion."

"Listen to me," said Mérindol, kindly. "I don't want you to be sent back to the galleys. I am resolved that you shall have a chance of becoming a different man. You don't look or talk like a hardened villain, by any means. Whatever you may have to tell me, I will assist you in making your escape, and perhaps I will do even more for you. That will depend upon the confession you are about to make to me. I wish it to be full and complete. Begin—but first of all sit down and drink a glass of rum."

The convict declined the liquor with a gesture, but sank into an old arm-chair that stood near by. Mérindol seated himself astride a stool, and lighted a cigar, while Piganiou perched himself on the

edge of the table, and began to fill his pipe after extinguishing his lantern. The dawn was breaking, and all was now calm out-of-doors.

"I will tell you all, sir," began the convict, "since you desire it. My name is Jacques Mongeorge, and I am the son of a farmer who gave me a liberal education. He sent me to Paris to study law, afterwards he purchased a notary's practice for me in a small town of the Ardennes. I had lost my mother on coming into the world, and my father died a year after I began practising. He left me a small estate, which I was obliged to sell to finish paying for my practice, but I managed to live very comfortably on my earnings. I had simple tastes, and liked my profession. But chance brought me misfortune. Near the town where I resided there was a château belonging to the Count de Porcien, an old man who had entirely renounced society after seeing a great deal of it. He was wealthy, but was not known to have any relatives; he had resided in the neighbourhood for ten years or so, receiving no visitors, but he had brought with him a child who could hardly be his daughter, for she was only four years old, while he was over seventy. Her name was Cécile, and this was all that was known about her. When I began practising the child had grown into a charming young girl. She had been educated by an English governess, who accompanied her everywhere, and she never addressed a word to anyone when they went beyond the park, which rarely happened. I scarcely knew her by sight, but one day Monsieur de Porcien sent for me to draw up a lease he wished to renew with one of his farmers. This was the beginning of our intercourse. Subsequently I returned to the château, where at first he only consulted me about business matters, but gradually we began to discuss other subjects, and I soon discovered that Monsieur de Porcien was a man of varied and extensive acquirements, refined taste, and lofty ideas. He was a nobleman of the old school, perfected by contact with modern society; consequently I felt both pleased and proud to be invited to play backgammon with him of an evening."

"Mademoiselle Cécile was present, probably," remarked Mérindol with a smile.

"Yes, sir, and I fully appreciated her manifold charms both of mind and person. But she was a mere child, scarcely fourteen, and the affection I conceived for her was almost paternal, while she, in turn, manifested for me an almost filial-love, which seemed even deeper than that which she felt for Monsieur de Porcien, though her manner towards her aged protector was always extremely affectionate and devoted."

"But you must have finally ascertained who she was?" remarked Mérindol, beginning to feel interested in the narrative.

"Never, sir; and I don't think that she knew herself. The count told me she was an orphan, but that was all he did tell me, and I never ventured to question him on the subject. However, one day, about eighteen months afterwards, he informed me of his intention to bequeath the whole of his fortune to Cécile, and

requested me to draw up a rough draft of a will. He wished to make her his sole legatee, with the reserve of a few trifling legacies which he indicated. His health had been severely tried during the winter, and he feared that death was not far off. I took him the draft that he asked for. He read it attentively, made two or three trifling changes, and then began copying it in my presence. I examined this copy carefully, and then pointed out several alterations which seemed to me advisable. He made a note of them, and told me he would give me the next day the duly-attested document, which would insure the transmission of his property to Mademoiselle Cécile. As she was mentioned in the will as the child of unknown parents, I concluded that the count had taken her from some foundling asylum. This idea agreed with several remarks he made in my presence respecting distant connections who were waiting to inherit his belongings. Two days elapsed, and then I was hastily summoned to the count's bedside. He had been taken very ill during the night, and felt that he was dying. Cécile was weeping alone at the bedside. He dismissed her with a gesture, and handed me a paper which he took from under his pillow. ‘This is my will,’ he faltered, though not without a terrible effort. ‘Fortunately, I have had time to recopy the one I wrote in your presence. It is correct in every respect, and I depend upon you to see that my last wishes are carried out. It will perhaps be contested. I have evil-hearted relatives who will never forgive me for disappointing them, but you must protect Cécile’s interests, and watch over her; I entrust her to your care.’ He could say no more. His voice failed him, and he gasped for breath. The priest whom Cécile had sent for entered the room. I lacked the courage to witness the death struggle, so I left the house and hastened back to the village. But when I looked at the document the count had handed me, I uttered a cry of despair. The count had made a terrible mistake. He had given me his rough copy, which, being neither dated nor signed, was of no value whatever.”

“That was a fatality,” exclaimed Mérindol. “What! had the count mistaken one paper for the other?”

“Yes, sir,” Mongeorge sadly answered. “I realised the consequences of this unfortunate mistake, but I flattered myself that it was not irreparable. I hastened back to the château, in hopes Monsieur de Porcien might still be alive, but, on arriving there, I learned that he had just breathed his last. I said to myself that the count had made a mistake in giving me this paper, but that the real will must be in existence—that it would be found under his pillow. But that same evening I learned that there were no grounds for this hope. The priest, whom I questioned, assured me that Monsieur de Porcien had left nothing in writing, and it seemed as if the deceased had burnt the real will, thinking that he was destroying the scrawl he afterwards gave to me. The next day the count’s valet came to inform me that two of Monsieur de Porcien’s cousins had arrived from Paris. It was impossible to say who had

informed them of their relative's sudden death, but they had already taken possession of the château, and their first act had been to drive away the poor child whom the count had protected and cherished for so many years. Cécile was homeless and starving. Her governess had deserted her. She did not know where to go, and the valet, who was a kind-hearted fellow, had advised her to take refuge with me. He informed me that he would bring her to my house in an hour if I would consent to receive her."

"You did not refuse, I trust?"

"No," replied the poor fugitive, with a grateful glance at Mérindol, "no, I did not refuse. I knew that I should compromise myself, that slander would not spare me; but that made no difference. The house in which I lived was separated by a small garden from a pavilion, which I had furnished for the use of a friend who often spent his vacations with me. There I installed Cécile, who scarcely thanked me, so greatly was she overwhelmed by her grief. What should I do with this child? I could not think of marrying her. I did not love her in that sense, and yet I knew that her age would authorise the most malevolent suspicions. I shut myself up in my house to reflect. Under my very eyes there was the fatal paper, which needed only a date and signature to insure Cécile's happiness. I read it over and over again, cursing the mistake that had defrauded the orphan; and the more I examined the document, the more certain I became that only the stroke of a pen was necessary to make it valid. And I said to myself, that if I added the date and signature, I should repair an injustice, fulfil the last wishes of the Count de Porcien, and prevent this fortune, which he intended for his ward, from falling into the hands of relatives he detested. These relatives, who had driven Cécile from her home, were rich, while she was penniless. By restoring her the wealth of which a fatal oversight deprived her, I should be taking the part of Providence, which protects the weak. No doubt Providence would pardon me."

At this point, Mongeorge, who had gradually become extremely excited, paused. "Need I tell you the rest?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"You imitated Monsieur de Porcien's signature, then," exclaimed Mérindol.

"It was a very easy task, unfortunately, as I had in my possession several documents to which his name was affixed. I copied his signature below the will, and added the date, trying to imitate the handwriting of the testator."

There came a spell of silence. Mérindol was deeply touched, and even Piganou seemed affected. The confession had been made so frankly that it was impossible to doubt the convict's sincerity, and to deny that there certainly were extenuating circumstances. "Proceed, sir," said Mérindol, at last.

"I can tell you nothing you have not already guessed," muttered Mongeorge. "I sent the will to the judge of the local court, and

perhaps its validity would not have been questioned, if I had not been unpopular in the neighbourhood ; but as I lived a retired life I was considered proud. Besides, it was known that the count's ward was in my house, and this gave rise to scandal. Three days did not elapse before I was arrested, at the instigation of the count's legal heirs. I barely tried to defend myself. What could I have said ? No one but Mademoiselle Cécile had seen the count give me the will which he supposed valid : nor had any one heard his recommendations to me. Besides, even had I succeeded in proving that Monsieur de Porcien intended to bequeath his property to the orphan, I should still have been guilty in the eyes of the law, for I had committed forgery. I confessed everything the first time the investigating magistrate examined me, and I was sent before the assizes for trial."

" And the jury found you guilty ? " exclaimed Mérindol.

" Alas, yes, I defended myself very badly, and the judges were prejudiced against a man whom no one supported. The fact that I was a notary, made my crime appear exceptionally grave. Moreover, the poor child for whom I had sacrificed my honour could not testify in my favour, for the grief and excitement she had undergone, had made her seriously ill. Only her written deposition, which no one believed, could be read, and she very narrowly escaped being accused as my accomplice. I was convicted, and sentenced to the highest penalty."

" And what became of the young girl ? "

" I think she is dead, though I am by no means sure. She was taken to a hospital—yes, to a hospital. Monsieur de Porcien's heirs treated her like an *intrigante* who had tried to defraud them of their relative's fortune."

" What were the names of these scamps ? "

" I have forgotten them—willingly forgotten them ; was afraid I might be tempted to revenge myself, and God bids us pardon our enemies."

As Mongeorge spoke, he seemed transfigured. His eyes met Mérindol's unflinchingly, and his expression so plainly revealed his loyal feelings, that the young marquis took hold of his hand and pressed it. " I am only a convict," murmured the ex-notary.

" But you are going to become an honest man again ; you *are* one already ! " exclaimed Mérindol. " What do you propos. *ving* when you are out of France ? "

" Earn my living honestly, by manual labour, if necessary."

" And you intend to make no attempt to find the girl you spoke of ? "

" I should not succeed ; even if she were still alive, it would be better for her never to see a runaway convict like me."

" But, if I found her, if I sent you news of her ? "

" Would you really do that ? " exclaimed Mongeorge.

" Yes, on conditions that you persevere in your resolution to atone for your fault by leading an exemplary life. I will see that

you reach Italy in safety, and before leaving you, I will give you a small sum of money—enough for you to live on until you can find something to do. You must change your name, and write once a month to Piganiou, who will help you to escape this evening, and who will forward your letters to me. I promise to answer them promptly, and to give you any information I can about the orphan. You can give me the necessary particulars this evening when the hour comes for us to separate. In the meantime, you must rest. There is a bed upstairs. You need to recover your strength. Piganiou will show you your room, and bring you something to eat, and a bottle of wine. You can sleep at your ease. We will wake you up when it is time to start."

"How kind you are!" faltered Mongeorge, "how can I ever repay you?"

"By leading an honest life as I said to you before," interrupted Mérindol. "Now go."

The poor fellow did not venture to say any more, but followed Piganiou who now willingly guided him, for the story of this man who had become a criminal from very kindness of heart, had touched the old miller, though his was by no means a susceptible nature.

While the other two were ascending the staircase together, Mérindol opened a door which led to a broad terrace. "The other fellow must have escaped this way," he said to himself. "He is probably a long way off by this time, and I hope that I shall never meet him. The air of Paris is not likely to agree with him, and he will go elsewhere to be hanged; but even if he should take it into his head to return to his former haunts, he will not recognize the son of the man he once robbed, for Louis de Mérindol has ceased to exist. There is only Louis Bertin left."

II.

THE plain which stretches to the north of Paris is peculiarly unattractive. Here and there rise some dirty old buildings, while on all sides factory chimneys project upward towards the smoky sky. Near St. Ouen the scenery is less barren owing to the close proximity of the Seine, the banks of which are lined with factories, and workshops flanked by dwelling houses, standing in gardens where the foliage is of a dusty green. These abodes have been called into being by the fancies of rich manufacturers who find it both convenient and pleasant to imagine that they are enjoying the pleasures of country life while attending to their business.

Some three years after Louis de Mérindol's last visit to his ancestral manor, the largest and most imposing of these residences was unquestionably that occupied by M. Nalot, a metallurgist, who dealt mainly in brazier's ware and ironmongery. It had been erected for the express accommodation of his wife and daughter, who no doubt cared very little for society, for they seldom left their villa, where he himself spent three days of the week ; during the rest of his time he was detained in Paris by business. He discounted bills, promoted companies, and everything he undertook seemed to succeed wonderfully well. He was a man of about fifty, tall, and powerfully built, with a pleasant face. His manners were agreeable ; he talked well, and though he exhibited great firmness when occasion required, he was very amiable in every-day life. All those he dealt with spoke of him in the highest terms, and his numerous workmen adored him.

Madame Nalot was at least twenty years younger than her husband, and still very handsome. She led a very secluded life, and had the reputation of being very kind-hearted and charitable, and though M. Nalot paid much more attention to his business than to her, she conducted herself in an irreproachable manner. Her tastes were elegant, but she was not coquettish, and seemed to like the solitude in which she lived, her visits to Paris being extremely rare, while at St. Ouen she had no society whatever. In summer time she took long drives about the surrounding country, and in the winter she devoted a deal of time to music, possessing great skill as a pianist, and a very pretty voice. These were the only diversions that Mademoiselle Gabrielle, M. Nalot's daughter by a former marriage, usually enjoyed with her step-mother, who treated her as if she were her own child.

However, this pleasant, if monotonous, existence had undergone a slight change within the last six months. A young engineer had assumed direction of the factory early in the winter. He had just spent two years in England, where he had attracted notice by the skill he had displayed in working an iron mine in Wales, belonging to one of M. Nalot's business acquaintances. The latter had praised the young engineer so highly, that the manufacturer of St. Ouen had thought it well worth his while to secure his services. He had made M. Louis Bertin a liberal offer, and the latter had certainly had no cause to regret his return to France. His new position was above his hopes, and M. Nalot held him in high esteem, as he proved by admitting him to his family circle. As Louis was an excellent musician, his employer's wife and daughter became fond of his society. A capital conversationalist, moreover, a first-rate amateur artist, and a good rider, he had every quality likely to please two women living in retirement. M. Nalot seemed to approve of the intimate footing upon which his valuable assistant was received in the family, and he himself remained oftener than formerly to spend his evenings at the villa, for he greatly enjoyed the conversation of the young engineer, who seemed to be well informed upon almost every topic.

And yet M. Louis Bertin had, as Louis de Mérindol, been an idle, reckless waif. When the awakening came, when he had squandered the last remnant of the ancestral fortune, an old college chum, who had remained his friend in adversity, had recommended him to an English mining company under the name of Louis Bertin. He had wished to begin his new life out of France. He wanted to be forgotten, and he had succeeded beyond his hopes. Paris is a city where ruined men soon pass from mind, and in six months Mérindol's whilom companions had ceased to remember his existence. Moreover, he had never sojourned there for any length of time. He was oftener met at Homburg, Baden, or Florence, than on the Boulevard des Italiens. Moreover, his fortune, though he spent it royally while it lasted, had been too small to enable him to hold a prominent place in what is called high life. He had ruined himself quietly ; his downfall had not been one of those that create a sensation, and so, after two and a half years' exile, he had concluded that he could return to Paris without fear of past memories. Moreover, St. Ouen is not exactly Paris, and Louis mentally resolved to visit the city but seldom. This wise resolve cost him little, as he had acquired a genuine love for his profession, without losing aught of his natural refinement, rough as his duties seemed to be. It appeared, moreover, as if, in renouncing his idle and luxurious life, he had renewed his youth. So he was not long in the society of a charming girl like Gabrielle Nalot without falling in love with her. But he was too proud to allow any one to detect his feelings, and though six months had elapsed since he had entered upon his new duties, nobody suspected the truth.

The time had passed by very rapidly since Louis Bertin had taken

possession of the first floor of a pavilion which rose at the end of M. Nalot's grounds. It was an evening early in May, the air was mild and balmy, and Louis, after a hard day's work, had gone to stroll in the garden. He often met his employer's wife and daughter there. Madame Nalot was fond of reading English novels under the leafy branches, and Gabrielle came there to gather flowers. That evening, Louis strolled on smoking a cigar and reflecting over the strange vicissitudes of his life. Memories of the past crowded upon his mind, and he especially remembered his last visit to Mérindol, and the singular adventure which had marked it. He could still hear Piganiou's expostulations, and see the convict lying unconscious at the bottom of the Bat's Hole, the light shining from the window of the deserted manor, and the empty picture frames in the room which the thief had pillaged. He thought of all the actors in this scene which had occurred three years before. Piganiou was still residing at his mill. His business had prospered, and he still wrote frequently to Louis. But for nearly a year the latter had heard nothing of the unfortunate man he had saved. Guided by Piganiou, Mongeorge had reached Italian territory, where he was fortunate enough to obtain employment of a Genoese merchant, who made no inquiries as to his antecedents. At first the ex-convict had kept up a constant correspondence with his benefactor. His letters were most touching, and he solemnly promised to persevere in his honest endeavours. If he seemed to recollect the past, it was only as far as it was connected with the inquiries his generous protector had volunteered to make for him. Louis had not forgotten his spontaneous promise. On the contrary, before his departure for England, he made a trip to the department of the Ardennes, for the express purpose of obtaining some information concerning the Count de Porcien's unfortunate ward. The story as told him by the country folks was very unfavourable to Mongeorge : every one suspecting that he had desired to enrich the orphan girl and marry her afterwards. However, Louis persisted in believing that the fugitive had told him the truth when he asserted that he had been led astray by a feeling of unwise generosity. The young marquis did not succeed in learning the fate of the friendless orphan. He only heard that she had not died at the hospital, but that as soon as she had recovered, she had left the neighbourhood ; no one could tell him what had become of her although the general impression was that she had taken refuge in Paris. There were even persons who pretended having seen her driving through the Champs Elysées, in a handsome carriage, and who asserted she was leading a gay life. Mérindol had not the heart to repeat this gossip to Mongeorge, so he confined himself to informing him of Cécile's disappearance, and advising him to think no more about her.

The Count de Porcien's château in the Ardennes had been sold, and the heirs had returned to Paris. The governess, too, had gone back to England, and as for the unfortunate notary who had

left neither friends nor relatives behind him, many people supposed that he had died at Toulon, or had been sent to New Caledonia, which had just been made a penal colony.

Mongeorge's reply was resigned in language, and everything seemed to indicate that he now only thought of establishing himself comfortably in his foreign home. Gradually his letters became less and less frequent, and finally they ceased altogether. Mérindol then began to think that the former convict was dead; and, finally, he almost forgot him. As for Ricœur, the scamp who had stolen his papers and family portraits, he had probably gone to seek his fortune beyond the seas, for nothing had since been heard of him; and one might hope that he had met with the fate he so richly deserved.

As these memories recurred to the young man's mind, while he wandered about the garden, the past seemed to him more than ever like a dream, and not a very pleasant one, so he was trying to bring his thoughts back to the present, when, at a turn in the path, he found himself face to face with Madame Nalot. He was about to throw away his cigar, but she exclaimed, laughing: "No, no; I will not deprive you of a pleasure. Pray, finish your cigar. I wish it were allowable for me to smoke as well."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I confess that I regret the prejudice that forbids us such an innocent recreation. You men have all the privileges, and it is particularly unjust in this case, for if I am not very much mistaken, smoking and dreaming go remarkably well together, and we are much more inclined to indulge in reveries than your sex is."

"Do you think so?" said the young fellow, smiling.

"You must admit that if I did not like a quiet life, I should be terribly bored here."

"I cannot disparage what I myself am fond of. I have never been so happy as since I have been here."

"Is that intended as a compliment?" asked Madame Nalot, with a searching glance of her large black eyes.

"I only said what I thought," stammered Louis. "Both you and Mademoiselle Nalot have treated me as one would treat a friend, and scarcely a day passes in which you do not kindly allow me to see you."

"That is certainly a compliment, but I suspect that you would much rather live in Paris than spend all your time on the quiet banks of the Seine."

"You are mistaken, I assure you; and if Monsieur Nalot offered me a position in his Paris establishment, I should beg of him to leave me here."

"Your tastes are rural ones, I see. Have you never had any others?"

"Yes, I have; but one changes as one grows older."

"Why, you are but thirty, while my husband is fifty, and he is in no way partial to country life."

" Monsieur Nalot has an absorbing passion for business."

" A passion I should not advise you to cultivate ; we women can't understand it. We live only to love."

" Do you think that men never love ?"

" You say that as if you were in love, yourself."

This remark, which seemed very like a question, took Louis de Mérindol by surprise. Madame Nalot was usually reserved, and he was thunderstruck that she should question him point-blank about his private feelings. On the other hand he had noted how her eyes sparkled at times, how deep flushes spread over her creamy cheeks, and how her expression changed as if with constrained excitement. Her language and manner were refined ; she seemed to accept uncomplainingly the secluded existence that her husband imposed upon her ; and yet, Mérindol somehow fancied she had a spirit of rebellion that was only waiting for an opportunity to burst forth. He knew nothing about her past ; but he had often wondered what could have induced her to marry a rather vulgar man, who was by no means attentive to her despite her beauty. If Louis had been at all conceited, he might have flattered himself that Madame Nalot was making advances to him. When a pretty woman asks a young man if he is in love, he certainly has a right to reply with a declaration. But this idea did not occur to Louis, who was trying to devise some escape from his embarrassing position.

" In love ! " he exclaimed, gaily. " I thought I was once, and perhaps I was ; but I am quite sure that such is not the case with me now."

" So you have no idea of marrying ? " persisted Madame Nalot.

" How foolish it would be if I had ! No one would have me."

" How do you know ? " The words were accompanied by a glance which furnished the young engineer with abundant food for reflection.

" Oh, ho ! " he said to himself, " what can be her aim ? She evidently does not refer to herself, as she is already married. Does she intend to make me confess that I am in love with her step-daughter ? " Thereupon he added aloud : " We live in an age, madame, when one cannot marry without money, and I have none."

" But you have something better than wealth : youth, intelligence, and energy. With such attributes a man is always rich. You might leave my husband to-morrow without the slightest risk. Did you not secure an excellent situation in Wales ? You could do still better in America, if you chose to exile yourself as you did before."

" Perhaps so ; but now I am anxious to remain in France."

" I only mentioned America because I was born in South Carolina."

" Indeed ! I was not aware that Monsieur Nalot had ever resided in the United States."

" He ! he never crossed the French frontier in his life. It was

in Paris that I met him. My mother brought me to Europe when she became a widow, six years ago. I had the misfortune to lose her shortly afterwards, and finding myself alone in the world, I married for motives of—reason."

Mérindol bowed without replying. He did not know exactly what to say, and he thought it better to be silent than to run any risk.

"I feel a little tired," resumed the charming creole. "Will you sit down for a moment in the conservatory? I am in the habit of taking refuge there in the evening when I find the air a little cool."

"I have spent many very delightful hours there," said Mérindol, who had been received in the conservatory by Madame and Mademoiselle Nalot only the evening before.

"You will not enjoy yourself so much this evening, for Gabrielle is not coming. She has not felt as well as usual to-day. Oh! it is a mere trifle," said the step-mother, as she entered the conservatory. "Hers is a very nervous temperament, and the slightest thing gives her the headache. Come, let us sit down near the azaleas."

The conservatory was furnished with divans which made it a comfortable spot for conversation, and Madame Nalot having motioned Louis to a seat opposite her, exclaimed without any further preliminaries: "What do you think of Gabrielle?"

The young man started at this unexpected question, and stammered out a few complimentary words. "Why are you so embarrassed?" inquired Madame Nalot. "Is it because you are not indifferent to the dear girl's charms?"

This was rather too much for Louis, who was not inclined to betray his secret. "You cannot suppose that, madame," he replied coldly. "I fully appreciate Mademoiselle Nalot's merits, but I do not dream of impossible happiness. She is rich, I am poor; and I have just told you my ideas on the subject of marriage."

"They are not mine, as I told you before. But if my step-daughter had no fortune, would you think of marrying her?"

"You must admit, madame, that you are asking me a question to which it is very difficult for me to reply. I have never asked myself what I should do in such a case. One does not make plans on a mere supposition."

"So you have never thought seriously of Gabrielle?"

"Never," replied Louis.

Madame Nalot blushed, and the young man failed to understand why. "You are right," she said, after a short pause; "marriage is a very stupid invention. Real happiness lies in independence, and I don't understand how a young man can consent to relinquish his liberty—especially at your age. I every day regret having relinquished mine." A reply to this last remark would have been too embarrassing, so Louis maintained a prudent silence. "However," resumed Madame Nalot with an easy air, "I am not in question, and I beg your pardon for having questioned you as to your

private feelings. To atone for my indiscretion, I am going to be perfectly frank with you. I fancied I saw in you an inclination to cultivate the society of a certain young lady. You were so assiduous in your efforts to divert our solitude this past winter, that I somehow fancied that you were in love with my step-daughter."

"I certainly have done nothing to justify such a supposition," interposed Mérindol, quickly.

"Certainly not. It was mere conjecture on my part. We women see love everywhere. But I am very glad to find that I was mistaken, as I like you very much, and should be sorry to tell you anything that would make you unhappy, for if you loved Gabrielle you would be sorely grieved to learn that her father has certain designs in regard to her—"

"I naturally supposed she would marry."

"Yes; you know perfectly well that a girl is not likely to be an old maid when she is pretty and has a father worth several millions; but you are probably not aware that my husband has already promised the dear child's hand."

"What! she is about—"

"To marry a gentleman selected by Monsieur Nalot. It is decided. But how pale you are, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, madame. I—"

"Ah!" exclaimed Madame Nalot, springing to her feet, "I knew that you loved her. Do not try to deny it; your pallor betrays you."

Madame Nalot was even paler than Louis, however. She crumpled the lace of her dress in her clinched hand, and her eyes flashed fire. She looked superb. Louis would have admired her had he himself been less troubled in mind. Why had she dealt him this blow? He began to divine the truth and it overwhelmed him with consternation. He expected she would give full vent to her feelings for she seemed to have lost all self-control. But he did not know her yet. She became calm as quickly as she had become excited. A smile parted her lips, and she said quietly: "Forgive me, my dear sir. I only wished to try you—a whim which suddenly occurred to me. See what idleness leads to. One desires diversion, and one grieves a friend."

"Do I indeed look grieved?" inquired Mérindol. "I am surprised, perhaps, but why should the announcement of Mademoiselle Nalot's marriage affect me?"

"Why, indeed?" replied Madame Nalot laughing. "You assured me that you did not care for her, and you would not tell an untruth. But don't be angry with me. It is true there has been some talk of finding a husband for my step-daughter, but nothing is settled. I think there is one person who would have some chance if he pleased Gabrielle, but I doubt his success, although he is rich and of good standing. He is rather too old for her, however, as M. Nalot himself admits. So the matter is by no means settled. The fact that he has not yet been introduced to me is proof of this.

But I don't know why I dwell so long upon a subject that interests you so little. Let us return to the garden and talk of something else."

She rose to leave the conservatory. Mérindol followed her, trying to invent some excuse for taking leave of her, for he longed to be alone to reflect upon the singular conversation which had just taken place. Madame Nalot however seemed bent upon keeping up the talk, and she was again reverting to love-matters when Mademoiselle Gabrielle was seen approaching. The young girl blushed deeply on catching sight of Louis. "Come and let me scold you, my dear," cried Madame Nalot. "I begged you to come down to the garden with me, and here you have kept me waiting more than an hour. Fortunately Monsieur Bertin has been charitable enough to keep me company."

"I beg your pardon," murmured Gabrielle, "but I sat down to the piano to look over the score of the 'Magic Flute' that we received this morning, and the time passed so quickly—"

"Gabrielle, my child, take care. I am afraid that Mozart's music will turn your head. I believe you like it better than anything in the world."

"I like flowers, too," said the girl, glancing at Mérindol.

"Heliotrope especially," replied Madame Nalot. "You have a bunch of it in your bosom and another in your hair, and you show your good taste. The perfume is delicious. But where did you get it? There isn't enough here to make a presentable bouquet."

"These came from St. Denis, I believe," replied Gabaielle, rather embarrassed.

"Oh, I am not reproaching you. Only when you send for them again get some for me. I like everything you like, my dear. You know, too, that your father is fond of seeing us dressed alike. When he brings us bouquets he always procures two similar ones. And by-the-way, speaking of your father, have you seen him? He told me that he would be here to-day."

"He returned a little while ago and went into the factory, so his valet told me; I don't think he will remain here this evening, for the brougham is still waiting for him."

"Ah," said Madame Nalot, in a tone which indicated that her husband's frequent absences affected her but little.

Louis thought this a good opportunity to make his escape. "Monsieur Nalot must have some directions to give me before he returns to Paris, and if you will excuse me I will go to him," he remarked.

"I will allow you to do so on condition you return," replied Madame Nalot. "And, to be more sure of it, we will accompany you to the factory. What do you say, Gabrielle?"

"I think it will be a delightful walk," said the girl, looking down. She was evidently divided between a desire to detain the young engineer and some other sentiment which Louis could not fathom.

The factory was not far from the house, being reached part-way

by following the path which skirted the Seine and then by crossing some waste land which extended to the road to St. Denis. The main entrance faced that highway. However it was written that Louis, Gabrielle and Madame Nalot, should not take their proposed stroll together. They had just reached the garden gate when they found themselves face to face with the manufacturer, who had apparently come from the factory on foot.

"We were just going in search of you," said his wife.

"Have you anything especial to say to me?" he inquired, without even shaking hands with his wife or daughter.

Although Mérindol was accustomed to his employer's manner, he was struck by the coldness with which he greeted these two attractive women who were bound to him by the closest of ties. "Nothing," replied Madame Nalot, drily. "It is a lovely evening, and we thought we should enjoy a short walk. The garden is delightful, of course, but I know it by heart, and thought I should like a little variety in my promenade."

"You are right, my dear Marie, and I am perfectly willing you should go as far as you please with Gabrielle; but this evening you must dispense with your escort, for I wish to speak to Monsieur Bertin on important matters, and must detain him."

"Very well, we will go alone then," replied the manufacturer's wife, "we are accustomed to it."

She passed by her husband without even honouring him with a glance. Gabrielle followed her, though she perhaps felt no desire to do so, and Louis was left with M. Nalot, who said to him, "I want to talk with you, my dear fellow. Come with me to the end of the garden."

Mérindol, rather surprised, followed him without a word.

When they reached a path where no one could see or hear them, the manufacturer suddenly paused, and said, with an easy air: "Would you object to marry?"

Mérindol did not lack coolness and presence of mind, but his employer's question was so unexpected that it disconcerted him.

"Marry! I have never thought of it," he stammered.

"I can understand that," said M. Nalot. "You are young, you have plenty of time to think of it, and you probably fancy that you can marry more advantageously when you have made a fortune. That is the reasoning of a sensible man."

"I do not deserve your praise, as I have never reasoned on the subject."

"Then you have made no plans, and have contracted no engagement?"

"No, sir."

"I don't ask you this, my dear Bertin, from any desire to meddle with your private affairs, but in case you are free, I should like to know if you would feel inclined to marry a young lady handsomely dowered both by nature and her parents."

"Yes, certainly; if she pleased me."

"That assurance satisfies me, for I am certain that the young lady I refer to could not fail to please you. The time for a positive proposal has not yet arrived, however, so now that I know your views, let us give our attention to more pressing matters."

Mérindol bowed without replying. He hardly knew what to say, for surprises had followed one another with startling rapidity that evening. "One could swear that the husband and wife had both agreed to broach the subject of marriage to me," he said to himself. "What can they be after? It is not at all likely that they intend to throw their daughter into my arms, and yet the wife, who spoke more plainly than her husband, mentioned Gabrielle's name."

"My dear fellow," resumed the manufacturer, "our connection is not of very long standing, but I have had plenty of time to appreciate your worth, and I trust that we shall not separate. I charge myself with your future, which will be a brilliant one."

"I am very well satisfied with my position, sir; I am not ambitious."

"That is a mistake. All men of ability ought to be ambitious. It is the only way to succeed. I want you to be able to take my place one of these days. I am engaged in several enterprises, though until now you have only been acquainted with one of them —the least important of all."

"But the only one in which I can be of any real assistance to you. I am an engineer; nothing more."

"You are too modest. When a man can manage a large factory as you do, he is competent to do anything. It is not more difficult to manage a banking-house or conduct a stock exchange speculation."

"Excuse me, sir, but I know my abilities, and I assure you that I was not born to make a fortune in business. I managed my own affairs very badly; and I should not like to undertake to manage the affairs of others—"

"You mean that you squandered your own fortune. What does that prove? That you have to make another, and that you will certainly succeed in doing so. Economy is a very doubtful virtue, and an intelligent spendthrift has a better chance of making a position than a fool who contents himself with his income. Come, you must let me initiate you into my financial enterprises before making you a partner in them."

"If my services can really be useful to you, I will not refuse them, but I doubt their utility."

"This is the point in question. I have established near the Central Markets in Paris, a very prosperous concern. I deal in metals there, and do a good deal of bill discounting. Personally, I am too busy with large financial speculations to manage this establishment myself, so I have entrusted it to a very capable and honest man. But he is getting old, he is anxious to retire, and I am looking for some one to take his place. Now, I think you are the right man."

"On the contrary, I know nothing about commercial matters, nothing about bill discounting."

" You will have nothing to do with the discounting that is in charge of a subordinate ; but your studies on metallurgy has taught you all that is necessary for you to know to buy and sell metals. You are most competent in such a matter. On all questions of detail, old Dolizy, whom you will supersede, will give you information. At present everything here is so well organized, thanks to you, that the factory can dispense with your presence."

" What ! you intend to send me——?"

" To Paris, but only temporarily, to serve a sort of apprenticeship, which will be a stepping-stone to the future I dream of for you. You will remain nominally with the position you now hold, and you will resume your duties here as soon as you have completed your business education, or whenever you please ; for, if the experiment I propose proves distasteful to you, I won't insist upon your pursuing it. Under such conditions, I trust you will not refuse to make the experiment."

" I should not like to disoblige you, sir, so if you insist—"

" Yes, I do insist, and on your own account. Take my advice, Bertin. Wealth will be the result of this experiment—wealth and happiness. I spoke to you of marriage a moment ago ; I had my reasons for it."

Mérindol blushed. M. Nalot's meaning seemed sufficiently plain. What marriage could he allude to if not to one which would gratify the young engineer's dearest wishes ?

" I don't send you into exile, remember," added M. Nalot. " The ladies would never forgive me for depriving them of your society. Paris is not far off, and you can come to St. Ouen every evening, if you like. The matter is decided, is it not ? You consent ?"

" Yes, and I am very grateful for the interest you take in me," replied Mérindol. " When am I to enter upon my new duties ?"

" To-morrow, I will introduce you to Dolizy, and will personally install you in your new position, as well as in the suite of rooms intended for your use in Paris. Of course your old quarters here will remain at your disposal, but you need not trouble about the factory. Corraille understands how it is managed, and he can superintend it for a time."

" Corraille, the overseer you engaged last month ?"

" Yes. He is a rather surly-looking fellow, but he is energetic and industrious, and understands his business, as he proved in California."

" I have not yet had an opportunity of testing his ability, but he does not inspire me with much confidence."

" Indeed ? What have you to reproach him with ?"

" Oh ! nothing—but he has a bad look, and suspicious manners. He often disappears suddenly, especially during night work, and the other workmen seem to have taken a strong dislike to him."

" Because he is strict with them, no doubt. However, Corraille was recommended to me by a person whom I highly esteem, so

don't be uneasy, my dear fellow. All will go well in your absence, and on your return, everything will go still better."

Mérindol interpreted these last words in a sense favourable to his fondest hopes, and his face brightened. "I shall be quite at your service to-morrow, sir," he answered.

"To-morrow!" repeated M. Nalot. "Now I think of it, I must return to Paris this evening, and I should like to install you in your new quarters as soon as possible. Suppose I take you with me? My brougham is waiting for me, and I will drive you to our Paris establishment. You need not sleep there unless you like, providing you will meet me there early to-morrow morning."

"As you please, sir; I think the ladies expected me to join them this evening but—"

"They must do without you for this once, my dear fellow. You can see them again to-morrow. Let us start."

Mérindol followed M. Nalot to the brougham. It was no slight sacrifice for him to leave St. Ouen so abruptly; but he carried flattering hopes away with him, and he contented himself with glancing as he passed along at a window decked with clematis, on the second floor of his employer's house. It was the window of Mademoiselle Gabrielle's room.

III.

M. NALOT'S brougham drawn by a pair of fleet horses rolled over the Avenue de St. Ouen, entered Paris, and at the expiration of three quarters of an hour drew up in front of an old building at the corner of the Rue de la Grande-Truanderie and the Rue Mondétour, two antique looking streets which the improvers of the French capital have respected. The building in question had certainly been first erected in the middle ages but it had been repeatedly repaired and partially rebuilt. The walls were six feet thick, the windows were little better than loopholes, and the drains were secured to a battlemented roof, but the entrance plainly dated from the seventeenth century, and the interior arrangements were those of present times. The door flew noiselessly open as if by enchantment, and M. Nalot's carriage, after passing under an archway, paused anew in a large, gas-lighted court-yard. A man in office-livery stepped forward at once to open the door and to assist the occupants of the vehicle in alighting. As Louis set foot on the ground, he glanced hastily around this strange court-yard which strongly resembled that of a prison. Stone walls pierced with windows, bristling with iron bars, rose up on all sides. Piles of metal of every kind were spread upon the pavement—piglead in pyramids, steel rails, sheets of copper and old iron of all descriptions. And they were nothing compared with the stock which the store-houses of the basement must contain.

"You probably did not imagine that we had such a large stock," remarked M. Nalot smiling.

"No, I confess it," muttered Mérindol. "All the copper I receive at St. Ouen is sent by a firm—"

"Dolizy & Co. Dolizy, whose place you will take, is my partner; I have my reasons for not wishing my name to appear. Perhaps the style of the firm will soon be Louis Bertin & Co."

"I do not deserve such an honour."

"You have mentioned your scruples before, but I trust I shall be able to overcome them. Come, and let me show you the rooms I intend for you."

Louis followed his employer up a wide stone staircase, and ahead of them went a tall office attendant who looked as imposing as a beadle. On the first floor one found the offices, the storey above being divided into suites of apartments of different sizes, all of

which had apparently been recently furnished. The largest had been reserved for the use of the manager of the establishment, and it did not appear to have ever been occupied, for various needful articles were lacking. There was a superb clock on the mantelshelf, but no curtains at the windows, and no mattresses on the four-post bedstead.

M. Nalot frowned, and asked the servant why the room had not been prepared. The orders had been received too late so the man replied. "I see that I have disturbed you uselessly, my dear Bertin," said M. Nalot. "It will be impossible for you to sleep here, so you will have to spend the night at a hotel. You would, doubtless, have preferred to remain at the villa, and enjoy Mozart's music, with my wife and daughter : but I should advise you not to return to St. Ouen to-night, as you must be here to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. You will find me in my private room as I shall spend the night here investigating an important business matter. Meanwhile you are quite at liberty. I shall not require your assistance this evening."

Mérindol was surprised, but certainly not annoyed, by this change in the programme, for he wished to have time for reflection, so he took leave of M. Nalot without asking for the slightest explanation, though his employer's conduct seemed a little singular. The manufacturer evidently wished to test Mérindol's ability in a new branch of business, and his attentions were most flattering ; but why had he decided to take him from St. Ouen so suddenly, especially when he must have known that the apartments were not yet ready ? All this seemed so incomprehensible to Mérindol that he finally ceased racking his brain to invent an explanation. He had plenty of other matters to think about. After leaving the establishment he wandered aimlessly through the streets, hardly knowing where he was going. He was thinking of the little room where Gabrielle Nalot usually spent her evenings, and where she must, at that very moment, be wondering at his strange disappearance. For he had left the villa without telling anyone where he was going. The servants had not even seen him enter the brougham. "I am half inclined to return to St. Ouen," he said to himself. "It is not yet nine o'clock. By taking a cab I can reach the station in twenty minutes, and I can return to Paris by the last train."

But it occurred to him that the gates of the villa were always closed by ten o'clock, so that it would be necessary to ring the servants up ; besides, if he saw Madame Nalot, she might question him, in which case he would hardly know what to reply. It would be better for him to postpone his visit, and he decided to do so. While musing, he had walked on, and he now found himself on the Quai de la Mégisserie, near the Pont-Neuf. He was asking himself what he should do till bedtime, when he perceived a steamboat approaching the quay, and the idea of going aboard occurred to him ; however, had he foreseen the result of his excursion, he certainly would not have made it. The boat was going down the Seine,

making its last trip for the day ; but it would have been all the same had it been ascending the river, for Mérindol left his course entirely to chance, having no other desire than to muse upon his love affairs. For Mérindol was in love—more deeply in love than he was willing to admit—and he was now beginning to see a possibility of eventually marrying the girl he adored. M. Nalot, who never spoke rashly, had just given him an assurance, the meaning of which was sufficiently plain. It is true that he had not mentioned Gabrielle's name, but it was allowable to believe that he had referred to her, and Madame Nalot's language had been most precise. She had doubtless been apprised of her husband's plans, though she did not seem to approve of them. As for Mademoiselle Gabrielle, Louis knew what to think of her sentiments, although no vows had ever been exchanged between them. But her eyes had spoken unmistakably, and Mérindol had virtually made a declaration of love by means of flowers.

He had each night laid upon Gabrielle's window-sill a bouquet of heliotrope, to do which he was obliged to scale the wall of the villa like a cat, with the help of a trellis which M. Nalot had certainly not placed there for that purpose. Each morning the bunch of heliotrope had bloomed on the bosom of Gabrielle, who wore it all day ; and this preference for the fragrant flower had that very evening drawn a sarcastic remark from her stepmother. As Mérindol leaned over the railing of the boat, he said sadly to himself : “To-morrow, she will open her window and find nothing.”

Then, to console himself, he reflected that he would soon be able to exonerate himself of any charge of neglect, as he should certainly see her on the morrow. While he was thus reflecting, the little steamer drew near the Pont de la Concorde, and Mérindol decided to land. He did not care to show himself on the boulevards, where he was likely to meet former acquaintances, but he fancied he would not run any risk by ascending the Champs Elysées on the left hand side, where, as a rule, but few people are found, most of the concerts and other places of public resort being situated across the avenue. However, the path he selected was not so deserted as he thought ; and he soon met a number of people bound for an open-air concert, where the orchestra was in full swing. Farther on he met a party emerging from a restaurant, and to crown his ill luck, he finally jostled a group of people gathered on the side walk.

“Why, it's he,” said a woman who formed part of the little gathering.

“Impossible. He is in Australia or Kamtchatka,” replied a man.

Louis, fearing recognition, was about to cross the avenue, when the woman added : “I am sure of it,” and looking the young engineer full in the face, she said, “are you not Monsieur de Mérindol ?”

“Excuse me, madame,” stammered Louis. “I have not the honour of your acquaintance.”

“You don't know me ? Well, that is good. Must I tell you my

name to refresh your memory ? Don't you remember Delphine—Delphine de Guibray, formerly of the Gymnase Theatre, and for the time being without an engagement?"

"Why, Mérindol, is it indeed you ?" exclaimed the actress's escort. "Where have you come from, my dear fellow ?"

Louis saw that further prevarication would be useless. An unfortunate chance had brought him face to face with a young actress who had rendered him some slight assistance in spending his fortune, and with one of his former comrades, Jean d'Autry. They were not alone. The two gentlemen who had been chatting with them now approached, and two exclamations resounded at the same time, for they also had known Mérindol in the days gone by, and he recognized them at a glance. Thus he found himself again in the midst of the very associations he was trying to forget, and nothing remained for him but to make the best of the matter. "Well, yes, it is I," he exclaimed, as gaily as he could. "How do you do, all of you ? How are you getting on, my friends ?"

"How goes it with yourself ? What have you been doing since your disappearance ?" asked Jean d'Autry.

"Oh ! I have been knocking about the world."

"After a position, eh ? Have you found one ?"

"Not yet, but I'm still searching. I'm only in Paris for a few days."

"That is no reason for shunning old acquaintances who have often regretted you. Usually, when a fellow has spent his last penny, people say : 'Another good man gone wrong,' and think no more about him, while you were talked about for six months or so. Remember that you were always a great favourite with us, and now we have found you again, we shall not let you go. You must come to Delphine's and take tea with us."

"Impossible ! I leave this evening."

"For California ? Don't try that dodge with us."

"No, for St. Germain, where a friend has granted me hospitality for a few days."

"Your friend must do without you until to-morrow. We are going to have a good time of it. Delphine has invited some friends, and there will be a game of baccarat with a gentleman who never stakes less than fifty thousand francs as banker."

"It is long since I played at baccarat."

"Yes, I understand ; for want of ammunition. No matter, you can watch the others."

"Thanks ; but I am not yet sufficiently sure of myself to put myself in the way of temptation."

"Oh ! in any case, you will get off with the loss of a few louis, and I will lend you some if you like. A man always wins when he has gone several years without touching a card. I should be delighted to see you win five hundred louis from that rascal Porcien who has drained us all dry."

"Porcien !" repeated Mérindol. "What ! is the gentleman named Porcien ?"

"Yes," said Jean d'Autry, "this redoubtable player is called Porcien, in fact the Count de Porcien. Do you know him?"

"No, no, not at all," stammered Mérindol. "But it seems to me I have heard the name before."

"It isn't a pretty name, by any means, but the owner of it is worth three or four millions."

"And he is very agreeable, I am sure, whatever d'Autry may say to the contrary," added Delphine. "And, my dear Louis, I should like to introduce him to you. You will come, won't you?"

Mérindol did not say, "Yes," but he was in no haste to say "No." This Count de Porcien must be the cousin and the heir of the old nobleman who had protected that poor orphan, the innocent cause of Mongorge's ruin. Mérindol had not forgotten the sad story, and he said to himself that the man who had despoiled Cécile might, perhaps, be able to tell him what had become of her.

"It's agreed. We carry you off," said Jean d'Autry. "Delphine's landau is close by; she never comes to dine at the Pavillon d'Armenonville without it; and it will hold us all very comfortably."

"No, I shall crowd you."

"Nonsense! you are as slender as ever. Besides, my dear fellow, I insist in your own interest. Porcien will bring with him to-night one of his friends who has made an immense fortune in America; he owns a silver mine somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, I think. You were an engineer, I believe, once?"

"And I am one still."

"Then you can talk with this gentleman, and he will perhaps offer you a splendid position."

The future Mérindol dreamed of was at St. Ouen, and he had no desire to cross the seas, but a feeling of curiosity impelled him to accept the invitation. He was a trifle superstitious, and he had a presentiment that he would learn something of importance respecting M. de Porcien. There was nothing, moreover, to prevent him from spending the night as he chose, for M. Nalot would not expect to see him before seven o'clock the next morning, and it would be pleasanter to spend the time among old acquaintances than in bed, at a hotel where he would probably not close his eyes. These considerations flitted across his mind, and he came to a decision. "I don't want to be accused of shunning my old friends, so I am at your service," he said.

"That's right!" the others shouted in chorus.

"It is really very kind of you," added Delphine. "I should never have forgiven you for not coming. In ten minutes' time we shall be there. I have the finest trotters in Paris."

The carriage, a superbly appointed equipage, was waiting a short distance off, the party climbed in, and the horses started off in the direction of the Rue de Téhéran, where Delphine, like a popular and well-paid actress, occupied a stylish flat on the first floor. By the time that the house was reached the whole party was in the most exuberant spirits, and shouts of delight arose when the maid an-

swered that several friends of madame's had already arrived. "Monsieur de Porcien, too, is here," added the girl.

"Then I will take the liberty of introducing Mérindol to him, while you change your dress," said Jean.

"That is a good idea," replied Delphine de Guibray. "I sha'n't be long," and she hurried towards her room.

"Am I acquainted with any of the other people?" said Louis to D'Autry.

"No. I think not. Three years work many changes in our circle, as you well know."

"Then I must ask you all not to introduce me under my real name. Mérindol disappeared some years ago, and I don't care for any one to know that he has returned. Besides, this Monsieur de Porcien may have heard of me."

"I think not. He formerly resided in the country, and seldom visited Paris while you were here. But that makes no difference, we will call you whatever you like."

"Any name will do—Bertin, for instance."

"Here goes for Bertin! If your creditors heard of a Monsieur Bertin, they would never suspect it was you."

"I have no creditors; but—"

"You have a reason for maintaining your incognito. I don't ask what it is. But to prevent any blunder, I shall call you Louis." So saying, D'Autry took Mérindol's arm and led him into the drawing-room.

They there found half-a-dozen pretty women of the theatrical profession, but momentarily "on leave," who greeted them with exclamations of delight. The game of baccarat had not yet begun, as the gentleman who was to hold the bank did not appear inclined to waste his time upon members of the fair sex.

This capitalist was leaning against the mantelshelf, and showed no disposition to imitate the ladies, who darted forward to meet the new arrivals. But Mérindol had eyes for him alone; and this was only natural, as his principal motive in accepting Delphine's invitation had been to make M. de Porcien's acquaintance. The count might have been about fifty years of age, though he looked a trifle younger. He was tall and thin. His angular face was clean shaven, and his olive complexion indicated a southern origin, unless indeed he had merely been sunburnt by a prolonged sojourn in tropical climes. His whole appearance was certainly far from pleasing; and Mérindol's feeling on beholding him was one of repulsion.

"He looks like a man capable of obtaining possession of property by fraud, and of driving the rightful owner away," Louis said to himself. "I shouldn't be surprised if he found the will and threw it into the fire."

Mérindol now felt no desire to be brought into intimate relations with this man; but Jean d'Autry led him forward almost perforce, and said: "Permit me, count, to introduce to you one of my particular friends, a distinguished engineer, whom I can warmly recom-

mend to you. If the American millionaire of whom I have heard you speak, needs a manager for his mines, he could not find a more competent person."

"Excuse me," interposed Mérindol, hastily, "but I did not ask you—"

"Ah, so the gentleman is an engineer?" interrupted M. de Porcien, gruffishly. "I am glad to hear it, and it is probable that my friend would be glad to avail himself of his talents. I will speak to him on the matter."

"This evening, eh?"

"No; he won't be here this evening; but I shall see him tomorrow. Your name, sir, if you please?" added the count, addressing Mérindol, who drily replied: "My name is Louis Bertin; but I assure you that I haven't the slightest desire to go to America."

"Louis Bertin!" repeated M. de Porcien. "Oh, I understand that you don't need to cross the seas to secure a situation. You have one already."

"How do you know that?"

"Are you not employed at a manufacturing establishment at St. Ouen?"

"Possibly," stammered Louis, thoroughly disconcerted. "But—"

"You need not blush," said M. de Porcien, looking at him intently. "I know your employer, and he has often spoken to me of you in the most complimentary terms. But I did not expect to meet you here."

"Why not, if you please?"

"Because Monsieur Nalot told me that you were a very steady and industrious young man. These gentlemen lead a fast life, as they have a perfect right to do, as they are rich, while you—"

"But Louis was rich once," exclaimed D'Autry. "He did wrong to run through his fortune so quickly, perhaps; but he certainly has a right to amuse himself for once in a way if he chooses."

"I don't object, I'm sure. I am not Monsieur Nalot's partner."

"You have no right to criticise my actions, sir," said Louis, hotly, "and your remarks are very much out of place."

"Oh, don't get angry, young man. I am not in the habit of concealing what I think; but I had no intention of giving offence."

"Come, Louis, what is the matter with you?" interposed Jean d'Autry. "We came here to enjoy ourselves, not to quarrel. Monsieur de Porcien is going to act as banker. Wait until you have lost some money before you lose your temper."

"You know very well that I don't play."

"That is to say you have given up playing, for there was a time when you did not deprive yourself of the pleasure. You were a very daring and brilliant player in your day."

"What I was is not in question, but I have no business here, and I am going off."

"What! what! you are going?" exclaimed Delphine, who had just entered the drawing-room in evening dress. "You shall do

nothing of the kind. I object most decidedly. You promised to stay, and I shall keep you. The Count de Porcien would never forgive me if I let you go off like that."

"I beg you will not take my words seriously, sir," said the count in an entirely different tone. "I thought my age authorised a little freedom on my part; but if I have wounded you, I sincerely beg your pardon, and I assure you that you will disappoint me very much if you refuse us the pleasure of your company. Madame de Guibray's friends are mine, and when I meet a well-bred man at her house, I am always anxious to retain him."

Mérindol replied to this courteous speech by a rather cold and haughty bow, but he refrained from giving any other sign of displeasure. He recollects that this was an ill-chosen place for any scene, and that his precipitate departure would make him appear ridiculous. It would be better for him to hold his tongue than to supply food for gossip. He meant, moreover, to take time by the forelock, and to acquaint M. Nalot with his adventure the next morning, for he thought it best to speak to his employer about the Count de Porcien, before the latter had an opportunity of seeing the manufacturer. Otherwise, M. Nalot might comment unfavourably on his conduct and his associates. It was almost certain also that M. de Porcien would learn Mérindol's right name sooner or later through Delphine, and it was equally probable that he would then tell M. Nalot that Louis Bertin was really Louis de Mérindol. The latter had no cause to be ashamed of his past life, nor had he any intention of retaining his incognito indefinitely. He realised that it would be necessary to resume his identity some day or other, and since M. Nalot had made him those matrimonial overtures, he had more than once asked himself if the time for revealing the truth had not already arrived.

At this point Delphine de Guibray interrupted his reflections. "Come, my dear fellow," she said, taking his arm, "the table is ready in the smoking-room, and the count is going to give us a nice game of baccarat. You certainly won't insult me by deserting us just as the fun is about to begin."

The count seconded her words by a smile and a gracious gesture, and the whole party wended their way to the smoking-room, where M. de Porcien took a seat at the table with the ease of a man who is in the habit of acting as banker. The others divided into two groups—all the women of the party instinctively congregating on one side, that on which the banker bestows least attention, as the money staked there is usually small in amount. Mérindol also stationed himself there, as he intended to risk merely a few louis; and he placed himself between the mistress of the house and a pretty woman who would certainly have attracted his attention in days gone by, but whom he now scarcely condescended to notice. The count had produced a bundle of bank notes and two or three rolls of gold, and he was now engaged in opening the packs of cards he intended to use. He did this gravely, almost solemnly, with the care and

precision of a Monaco croupier. It was evident that card-playing was a serious matter, not a mere amusement, with him.

Jean d'Autry began the attack with a five hundred franc note, and his pocket-book plainly contained several others. He was a gay fellow of position, whom Mérindol had well known some years before, and he still seemed to have plenty of money. The women unanimously adopted one louis as the amount of their stakes, and Mérindol, who had scarcely a dozen about him, thought it advisable to follow their example. Baccarat is a most uncertain game. Sometimes luck shows itself on one side from the very beginning, sometimes nothing like a "run" is to be had. On this particular evening, however, the group on the right hand side of the banker—the gentlemen—lost persistently, while the ladies, on the contrary, were wonderfully fortunate. In less than a quarter of an hour two players had lost every penny in their pockets. One of these was Jean d'Autry, who staked like a madman, and several others near him were seriously crippled, while a glittering heap of coin had accumulated in front of each of the women. Mérindol had, of course, profited by the good luck of his feminine neighbours, and though he had played on the whole with moderation, he had now and then risked a few bold strokes, which had proved marvellously successful. In fact, he had already won some sixty louis, and everything seemed to indicate that this very respectable sum would be still further increased. However, his success did not elate him in the least. He did not care to lose, of course, but he was by no means anxious to win. He well remembered the time when a card had made his heart throb almost to suffocation, but now his thoughts were elsewhere than in the game. It was a beautiful young girl who had wrought this miracle.

"I'm stumped," exclaimed Jean d'Autry at last. "Can I play upon parole?"

"You? yes," replied M. de Porcien. There was no mistaking the meaning of this answer, which signified, "I am perfectly willing to give credit to Monsieur Jean d'Autry, who is rich enough to pay his debts, but I shall only deal in cash with the other players."

The count was not so much to blame for making this distinction, for there were several persons of doubtful credit present; and yet, this word *you*, addressed to Jean d'Autry in exclusion of the rest of the party, offended Mérindol deeply. Besides, the more he studied M. de Porcien's face and manners, the more he disliked him. He behaved well enough, he expressed himself correctly, and yet there was something artificial about it all. One divined that his elegant manners were acquired, and when he spoke it seemed as if he were reciting a lesson. Mérindol wondered how M. Nalot had happened to make this singular person's acquaintance; and he resolved to ask Delphine de Guibray some questions about him later on.

Meanwhile Jean d'Autry hastily scribbled a number of I O U's of five hundred francs each. M. de Porcien dealt the cards again, and

the playing was resumed. The stakes had increased in amount, the losers trying hard to retrieve their fortunes, and the winners becoming gradually bolder and bolder. However, the ill luck of the masculine players persisted, and the good luck of the women became still more noticeable.

Jean d'Autry lost two I O U's of five hundred francs each, his neighbours even more ; and while their money helped to swell the pile in front of M. de Porcien, Delphine de Guibray won five louis, and Mérindol ten. Finally came the utter rout of the players on the right, and a series of triumphs for those seated on the left. When the cards were exhausted, Jean d'Autry and his friends declared they had had enough of it. The women, delighted with their good fortune, wished to continue ; but the count, probably considering it not worth his while to contend against such opponents, rose from his seat, and glancing at the notes given him by Jean d'Autry, remarked : " You owe me five hundred louis."

Mérindol had won a hundred. He was glad that the game had come to an end, for gambling had certainly ceased to amuse him. He even resolved to take himself off as soon as possible, having to see M. Nalot early in the morning. Delphine had just returned to the drawing-room, where the tea, which had served as a pretext for this card-party, was to be served, and thither the other women followed her, chattering like magpies. Several of the gentlemen were discussing their defeat, as wounded veterans discuss the battles in which they have lost a limb. Jean d'Autry, the most unlucky of them all, was brooding over his losses, and lighting a cigar to console himself. " Your evening's amusement certainly cost you dear," Mérindol said to him in a low tone. " What need had you to come here to play against this Monsieur de Porcien, for whom none of you are a match ? "

" He has such luck. It's always the same. I am fourteen thousand francs out of pocket this evening. I had four thousand with me when I came, and the remaining ten thousand must be paid before noon to-morrow. Monsieur de Porcien allows no delay."

" I never regretted my poverty so much before," said Louis. " But I was on the winning side this evening, and I made a hundred louis. Will you take them ? "

" Thanks," replied Jean d'Autry, pressing his friend's hand cordially. " I see that you are still always ready to oblige your friends. But I sha'n't take advantage of your kindness. I know where I can raise some money. A worthy usurer of my acquaintance will lend me what I want at twenty-five per cent. interest."

" I see that you also have not changed. But as you bear your misfortunes so lightly, I may perhaps venture to inquire who this Count de Porcien is who always come off the winner ? "

" My acquaintance with him is not of long standing," replied Jean, " but I will gladly tell you all I know about him. About a year ago Delphine, one of your old flames, by-the-way, was in very bad circumstances. She had been ill ; she had no engagement ;

an execution had been put in ; her horses were starving in the stables. None of her tradesmen would trust her for a penny ; her companions were beginning to cut her, and she was seriously thinking of joining an operetta troupe which was about to start for Cairo."

"That wasn't such a bad idea," muttered Mérindol.

"No ; but it is hard to make up one's mind to leave Paris. Delphine was spared this humiliation, however. On the day of the Grand Prix, when people had nearly forgotten all about her, we saw her at Longchamp, covered with diamonds, and prettier and more elegant than ever. Her turn-out, too, was magnificent. The surprise was intense, and there was a crowd round her carriage all day, for everybody wanted to know the origin of this change of fortune. But Delphine is shrewd. She told some of her friends that she had met an Australian nabob who was rolling in the gold of his inexhaustible mines, and who scattered nuggets broadcast. And she informed others that she had just inherited the property of an uncle, as if she had any wealthy uncles ! Her father was a doorkeeper, and her mother went out doing housework by the day. People believed what they pleased ; but though they watched her closely, no one was ever able to discover the real source of her wealth."

"I did not know she was so prudent. She used to proclaim her affairs everywhere."

"That is true ; but some women are capable of anything, even of keeping a secret. At all events, early this winter, she began to give teas twice a week, entertaining the old set, and later on she invited several wealthy foreigners. Men liked to go to her house because they enjoyed themselves there. She gave the most delightful little supper parties, and an enjoyable game of baccarat always followed. At last, one fine day, or rather one fine evening, she introduced to us this Count de Porcien who just won my fourteen thousand francs. She introduced him as she would have introduced any other stranger, and as we did not find him a very congenial companion, we gave him rather the cold shoulder. But soon he began to hold banks of ten and twenty thousand francs, and as he had the good sense to begin by losing, we formed a rather better opinion of him. Besides, he was a count, or at least he said he was."

"I should like to see his family parchments. From what part of the country does he come ?"

"I have heard him mention an estate he owns in the Ardennes."

"In the Ardennes ! it is the same man then !" exclaimed Mérindol.

"Do you know him ?"

"No, but I have heard that a Count de Porcien resided in that department. What does this one do in Paris ?"

"Nothing that I know of. His principal occupation seems to be card-playing."

"But has he no friends or relatives ?"

"Probably he has ; but I know nothing about them."

"That's strange. Does he go about with Delphine ?"

"Never, though he is evidently the source of her prosperity. When he is here, he acts as if he were the master of the house, but when we question Delphine on the subject, she always replies evasively. In fact it's strange, and I have often felt inquisitive and suspicious about this man."

"Do you suspect him of cheating at cards ?"

"Oh ! no ; we have watched him carefully, and not one of us has ever been able to detect the slightest unfairness in his playing ; but the mystery about him naturally excites our suspicions."

"Still you all seem to be on the best of terms with him ?"

"Men who risk fifty thousand francs at a sitting are becoming extremely rare, my dear fellow. When you were a gambler you would have done the same ; you would have sought his company in the hope of winning money from him. And you succeeded, this evening, strange to say. However, you gathered up your money with superb disdain. You must have retrieved your fortunes since you left us."

"I have succeeded in earning a living," replied Mérindol, somewhat embarrassed.

"You must be earning a handsome one, as a windfall of one hundred louis affords you but little pleasure. You have a very lucrative position at that factory at St. Ouen, probably ?"

"I am content with it."

"Confess that you were trying to deceive me when I met you in the Champs-Elysées a little while ago. You were only passing through Paris, you told me ; you were going to St. Germain, to spend a few days with a friend. Why did you tell me all those crams ? Were you afraid to trust me ?"

"Not you, but your companions ; and even now, I do not feel entirely safe, so far as they are concerned. I can't imagine how this Count de Porcien can know the manufacturer who employs me. If Porcien should find out that my real name is Louis de Mérindol, he would perhaps inform my patron that I had entered his employ under an assumed name. Delphine has promised to be silent, but some thoughtless word may escape her in conversation, and so I am going. Not seeing me she will soon forget me. And, by-the-way, this is a good chance to make my escape. All the gentlemen have gone into the drawing-room. Will you show me the way out, without summoning any one ?"

"Certainly, my dear fellow, but on conditions you allow me to see you again. I am living at the same place. You haven't forgotten my address ?"

"No, certainly not, and you may depend upon a visit from me soon."

"Then come this way," said Jean, opening a door that led into the ante-chamber. "Fly away, virtuous youth ! I will explain your sudden disappearance. I only warn you that if you fail to

keep your promise, I shall go to your factory in search of you. I shall have no trouble in ascertaining where it is; I have only to ask the Count de Porcien."

"You won't do that, I am sure," replied Louis, putting on his hat and overcoat. And, after exchanging a cordial hand-shake with his old friend, he hastened down-stairs and out into the street.

Glancing at his watch, he found that he still had plenty of time for a walk before looking for a hotel, and as the evening was delightful, he decided to remain a little while in the open air, for he was not sleepy, and he felt that a little exercise was necessary to quiet his nerves. He walked slowly down the Boulevard Malesherbes towards the Madeleine. The thoroughfare was deserted, and he paced along with his head lowered, trying to decide what course he should pursue as regards his change of name. Was it best to reveal the truth to M. Nalot at once, or to wait—till the manufacturer learnt the truth by chance?

The first course was certainly the most honourable one, but it wounded Mérindol to be obliged to confess that he had denied his ancestry in order to earn a living more easily. Moreover, if he decided to reappear in his true character, he was in no condition to prove that his name and title rightfully belonged to him, for he no longer possessed the family papers which would have served to establish his identity. Ricœur had stolen them. This would not be an insurmountable difficulty of course, as Louis could obtain plenty of conclusive evidence from former acquaintances and friends—Jean d'Autry, Delphine, Piganou, and the peasants of the Esterel—but he did not like the idea of resorting to such extreme measures, and asking M. Nalot to wait for proof of his identity until he could have proper certificates drawn up.

While thus reflecting, he reached the esplanade on the left hand side of the Madeleine church. There were several benches under the trees, and as Louis did not care to venture upon the main boulevards, the idea of sitting down here to rest occurred to him. Nearly all the seats were occupied by people of shady appearance, and Mérindol, not caring for such promiscuous society, walked on till he found a bench where only one man was resting, with his elbows on his knees, and his face supported by his hands. Mérindol sat down, paying but little attention to this solitary dreamer, who was plainly, though respectably, dressed in a black frock-coat and a silk hat. Like Louis, he was evidently in a meditative mood, from which the young engineer's appearance speedily aroused him. Turning partially round and resting one arm on the back of the seat, he began scanning Louis' face by the light of a street lamp near by. Mérindol's features probably awakened some vague recollection in his mind, for he soon drew a little closer, as if to see his companion more distinctly.

Mérindol soon became aware of this manœuvre, and his first impulse was to rise and go off, thus curtailing the stranger's scrutiny. But on returning his gaze, he, on his side, seemed to

recollect having seen this man before ; and so they sat looking at each other, each of them thinking he recognised the other, yet fearing a mistake. The man in black was the first to speak. "Excuse me, sir," he said, timidly, "but may I venture to inquire if you did not once reside in the department of the Var ?"

"Reside, no," replied Mérindol, greatly astonished, "but I was born there, and I spent the first years of my life there. But why do you ask that question ?"

"Because I met there, some three years ago, a person who strongly resembled you."

"I was there at that time, but I only remained there a few days."

"In an old château near the forest of the Estérel, a château that belongs to you ?"

"Quite so. As you are so well informed you can, perhaps, tell me my name."

"The name by which you were formerly known or the one you have since assumed ?"

"You know that I have changed my name then ?"

"I have changed mine also," said the man, eagerly, "and my face, too, must have changed, as you don't recognise me."

"It seems to me that we have met before ; but where, I can't tell."

"Then you have forgotten that you saved my life ?"

Mérindol hesitated for a moment, and then the truth flashed upon him. "The convict of the Bat's Hole !" he exclaimed.

"Yes, the convict, the poor wretch whom you brought up, nearly dead, from the bottom of a ravine, and who, thanks to you, succeeded in reaching Italy. Ah ! I knew that I could not be mistaken ! You are the Marquis de Mérindol, my preserver and benefactor—that is, I know that you now call yourself Louis Bertin ; at least, you signed that name to the letters you sent me while I was at Genoa."

"Letters which you ceased to answer after a little time, so I concluded that you were dead, and I, too, stopped writing. Explain your silence, and how it happens that I meet you again in Paris ? Don't you know the danger to which you expose yourself by returning to France ?"

"I do know it, sir, and I assure you that I should never have returned if I had not a duty to perform. I have sworn to find the orphan—"

"Ah ! the orphan for whose sake you committed a crime ! But I wrote to you that I myself had paid a visit to the Ardennes, and that no one could tell me what had become of the child. How can you hope to find her, and what can you do for her ?"

"Very little, alas ! I am not in a position to claim her. The ban that rests upon me has compelled me to assume another name. In any case, God forbid that I should link my fate with that of Cécile. But she may be poor, reduced to toil for her daily bread, and if so, I should like to assist her, to raise her from her poverty."

" You ! and how ? Have you made a fortune then ? "

" A fortune, no ; but by industry and economy I have saved a little money, and the banker of Genoa, who employed me, bequeathed me a small amount. I have almost enough to live upon with economy, and I have now but one aim in life : that is to repair, so far as lies in my power, the shameful injustice of which this young girl was the innocent victim. I quite recently became satisfied, beyond a doubt, that Cécile was in Paris, and I am now looking for her. I arrived here a week ago."

" With false papers, of course ? "

" They are false in the sense that they are made out in the name of Guiseppe Casaldi, but they were delivered to me by the authorities at Ancona, where I have recently resided, managing a branch house of my deceased employer's bank. He himself sent me there, and his heirs have given me an interest in the business. Indeed, I hope that I shall some day become their partner. I have done all I could to deserve this good fortune by practising the strictest probity."

" Oh ! I never thought you a dishonest man. Had I thought that, I should have contented myself with assisting you to escape from France, and should have taken no interest in you afterwards. One can excuse a great fault or even a crime, but no one protects a rascal. I am at a loss to understand, however, how you can have acquired this new position in so short a space of time."

" Oh ! I learnt the language very quickly, and now speak it well enough for the Italians to think me one of their compatriots, though my employer and his family of course know that I am a Frenchman. They took me for a political refugee when I first applied for a situation, and I did not undeceive them. Afterwards when my employer sent me to Ancona, he himself advised me to take the name I now bear."

" It seems, then, that you secured an excellent position ; and I am surprised that you should have abandoned it, and have come here, at the risk of recapture, to attempt to discover a girl who disappeared so many years ago. It is a foolish undertaking, and you did very wrong to give up the position you held."

" I did not give it up, sir. I asked for a two months' leave of absence, and obtained it. When it expires, I shall, of course, return to Ancona."

" I am glad to hear that ; but you are greatly mistaken if you think you will be able to lay your hands on Mademoiselle Cécile in a few weeks. If, by any miracle, you should meet her, you would not recognize her, nor would she recognize you."

" She may have forgotten me, but I am sure, that if I saw her—"

" Excuse me, but how long did you remain at Toulon ? "

" Ten years," replied Mongeorge hanging his head.

" And three more years have elapsed since you succeeded in making your escape. How old was the child at the time of your conviction ? "

" She was fourteen."

"Fourteen years and thirteen make twenty-seven years. She must be twenty-seven now, and a woman changes wonderfully between the ages of fourteen and twenty-seven. Besides even if she is still living—"

"She is living, I am sure of it."

"Perhaps so; but think of what may have happened to her during thirteen years! She is married, perhaps; possibly she is prematurely aged by want and toil, or by leading a gay life as was suggested to me in the Ardennes."

"That is impossible."

"But what else could you expect of a poor orphan, left homeless and friendless in a great city, where vice is ever on the watch for victims?"

"The information I have obtained leads me to believe that Cécile has resisted all the temptations that surrounded her, and has earned an honest living in the humblest way."

"The information you have received, you say? How did you manage to obtain any information?"

"The firm I represent at Ancona has numerous correspondents in France. I wrote to all those residing in the north and north-east, requesting them to try and ascertain the whereabouts of Cécile, who, I told them, was entitled to a large sum of money bequeathed to her by a relative at Ancona. For a long time all their efforts proved fruitless; but at last I received a letter from one of them stating that a person of Vouziers, near which town the deceased Count de Porcien resided, could give me some information about the orphan. It seems that after my trial, the poor child was taken to the hospital of Vouziers, where she lay ill for a long time. But one day, soon after her recovery, she disappeared, and it was ultimately discovered that she had started on foot for Paris, without money or references of any kind."

"I learned as much when I went to the Ardennes; but the people there could tell me nothing more."

"Well, one day some years afterwards, this person of Vouziers met Cécile in Paris, recognized her, and spoke to her. He had often seen her at the château, being a timber merchant who had bought the cuts in the Count de Porcien's woods."

"In what situation did he find the poor creature?"

"She was a waitress in a little restaurant near the Palais Royal. On my arrival here I had no difficulty in finding it, but Cécile was no longer there. She had gone away some six months before, stating that she had secured a position as cashier in a mercantile establishment."

"You must admit that this second disappearance was rather strange. Did she give the name of her new employer?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"That looks bad. When a woman has no intention of doing anything wrong, she does not take so much pains to conceal her whereabouts. You have abandoned all hope of finding her now I suppose?"

"Not yet, sir ; but my only hope now is that I may meet or hear of her, by chance. So I spend my time in walking about Paris."

"Take care that you do not find yourself face to face, not with her, but with some one who may have known you at Toulon. Who knows but what the very man who tried to kill you in the forest of the Estérel is here ? Paris is full of such people."

"Heaven grant that I may never meet Ricœur again !" murmured Mongeorge. "I am almost sure, though, that he believes me dead."

"That is probable. He can hardly think you survived your fall into the Bat's Hole. Have you ever heard anything of him since that adventure ?"

"Never, sir."

"Still he must have succeeded in getting safely out of the country. Had he been recaptured, I should have heard of it, for I remained in the neighbourhood several days after your departure. He was certainly a shrewd rascal, and he had the money he stole from you to begin life afresh with. He had some valuable papers, too, those he took from my desk. Thus armed and equipped, a man can accomplish a good deal."

"Especially in Paris, and Ricœur often told me that a man of his stamp could live nowhere else."

"That's true. But as he had formerly resided here I doubt if he has ventured to return. Fear of recognition must have deterred him. If I come in contact with him, I shall send him back to the galleys, for he contributed not a little to my father's financial ruin."

"Oh ! if he returned to Toulon his former comrades would kill him, for having stolen the money they had intrusted to me."

"Excuse me, but I fancy you are the person who might incur danger in that respect. You were the convicts' cashier, and they would accuse you of having betrayed your trust ; all the more so, as they don't know that Ricœur stole the money from you, and that you nearly lost your life in your efforts to save it from his clutches."

"Yes," replied Mongeorge, bitterly, "I am considered a dishonest man even among convicts ; and yet, I assure you that if I had been able to do so I should have already refunded the twenty-seven thousand francs which Ricœur appropriated."

"I don't think you are called upon to do that ; besides, to whom would you refund the money, supposing you possessed it ?"

"I could obtain the amount from my employers, for my interest in the business is worth more than that, and I should hand it to the convicts' banker could I only find him."

"Who is this strange individual who makes a speciality of investing stolen moneys ?"

"He is a former convict."

"I thought so. What figure can a man who engages in this honourable calling cut in Paris ? I hardly suppose that he has a current account with the Bank of France."

"He may have one, for he has very large sums of money at his

disposal. All the criminals in France are in correspondence with him. He is both their agent and banker. He protects them, too ; and his assistance is not to be despised, for he has, they say, an extensive acquaintance in all classes of society."

"What is his ostensible business ?"

"He changes it very often. When I escaped three years ago, he was a provision dealer in the Popincourt district ; but I don't know what he is doing now."

"Did you go to the address which had been given you, then ?"

"Yes, and I ran no risk in doing so, for I was not obliged to give my name, or to enter into any explanation whatever. I was simply to utter a certain phrase, and in case I received a certain reply to hand over the money. I was warned that I need expect no receipt."

"Thieves dealing on parole ! That's capital !"

"However, on going to the address I had, I found the premises occupied by a carpenter, who plainly had no idea whatever of the meaning of my words. He informed me, however, that the previous tenant of the place had failed and absconded."

"Taking the convicts' money with him, eh ? These interesting capitalists seem to be unlucky."

"Not as unlucky as you think, sir. The sudden disappearances of their treasurer are periodical, and the object of them is to throw the police off the scent. The authorities have a vague suspicion that this treasure exists, but they can never lay their hands on the delinquents. Every two or three years the cashier moves, and probably changes his ostensible occupation as well. Due notice of this change is immediately sent to all the prisons and places of confinement in a sure but mysterious way."

"Well, as you have had no connection with penitentiaries for the last three years the notice hasn't reached you. So much the better, you are spared a dangerous undertaking."

"I have given up all idea of it. I now only think of finding Cécile."

"Well, if I can be of any service to you in that matter, I shall be glad to lend you my help."

"You will allow me to see you again, then ?" inquired Mongeorge, with emotion.

"Why not ? I entertained you in my father's house when you wore a red blouse and green cap, and I can certainly keep up an acquaintance with you now. Where are you staying ?"

"At a quiet hotel in the Rue Trouchet—only a few steps from here."

"A quiet hotel you say ? That will suit me exactly."

"What do you mean, sir ?" inquired Mongeorge, greatly surprised.

"I will explain myself. I usually reside at the factory I have charge of at St. Ouen. But this evening, the gentleman who employs me brought me with him to Paris, where I shall probably be obliged to remain some little time, to my regret. He wishes to

give me the management of a concern he has started near the Central Markets, and I begin my duties to-morrow. However, I find myself houseless for to-night, as the room which I am to occupy at our place of business is not ready. I was thinking of looking for a hotel when you spoke to me. Will you take me to the place where you are stopping?"

"What! you would not object—"

"To spending the night under the same roof as Giuseppe Castaldi? No, certainly not. You will even do me a favour by taking me to a suitable hotel. I shall call to see you occasionally as long as I remain in Paris. And who knows, I may perhaps be able to give you news of the girl you are looking for, for I shall have to deal with a number of merchants. If I should chance to hear any of them speak of a charming employée named Cécile I will certainly let you know."

"You are far too kind, sir," murmured Mongeorge, gratefully, with his eyes full of tears.

Mérindol now rose up, and he did not disdain to take the arm of the unfortunate man whom three years of commendable efforts had vindicated far more effectually than any legal decision could have done.

IV.

LOUIS DE MÉRINDOL had formerly been an idle, dilatory fellow, but since his conversion there had been a radical change in his habits. After spending the night at Mongeorge's hotel he rose with the sun, dressed himself with wonderful alacrity, and started for the Rue Mondétour, where he was to meet M. Nalot at seven o'clock precisely. The walk was not at all a short one, but Louis did not find it tiresome. Indeed, after his three years' absence from Paris it afforded him great pleasure to walk leisurely through the streets, and note the morning aspect of the city. Perhaps, by reason of his conversation with M. Nalot the night before, and the hopes it had stirred within him, everything now appeared delightful. The dingy old houses that rise up near the grand old church of St. Eustache seemed to him almost cheerful in their aspect; and he thought all the women who passed him charming. This was a delusion due to his state of mind, however, for the majority of those he met were huckster-women or cooks on their way home from market. But on reaching the end of the Rue Montmartre, he suddenly found himself face to face with a young woman who had just come from the Rue Montorgueil, and who was certainly worthy of admiration.

She was very plainly but neatly dressed, wearing a brown, tight-fitting jacket, a little hat she must have made herself, together with low-heeled boots and kid gloves which looked quite new. She was very beautiful. Her complexion was creamy; she had large, dark eyes, shining with soft brilliancy under arched brows; lips as red as pomegranate blossom; and, best of all, an intelligent, animated expression that gave one an irresistible longing to hear her speak. Her figure was perfect, and her hands and feet were of aristocratic delicacy. Mérindol, who was a connoisseur, noted all this at a single glance, and wondered who this charming creature could be. He had no idea of starting a flirtation, but from force of habit he could not help classifying the women he met, just as an agriculturist can't help distinguishing wheat from rye in the fields he crosses. To what social category did this young woman belong? She was not a shop-girl. Shop-girls go without gloves in order to purchase high-heeled shoes; and this young woman wore low-heeled ones. Nor was she a lady's-maid. Lady's-maids wear the cast-off garments of their mistresses; and this young woman's toilet had an unmistakable air of individuality. Mérindol at last felt inclined

to take her for a teacher, who was going to give some lessons, an excellent reason for being out so early in the morning.

The matter would not have engrossed his attention for long had he not seen that this young person was going in precisely the same direction as himself: in fact, to reach M. Nalot's establishment, he had only to follow her. He did so, but at a little distance, and he soon saw her pass the markets, and turn to the left into the Rue Mondétour. As she was about to enter this narrow, gloomy street, she was accosted by an old beggar-woman, and paused to give her alms. Moreover, Mérindol noticed that instead of contenting herself with giving some coppers, she entered into conversation with the poor woman; and as he drew nearer he perceived her drawing some bread and soup tickets from her pocket. As a rule, young and pretty Parisiennes are not so well prepared to perform deeds of charity in the street; and Mérindol decided that this one must be as good as she was beautiful.

He did not pause or slacken his pace, for fear of annoying her, but walked straight on to M. Nalot's establishment, at the corner of the Rue de la Grande Truanderie. He had only seen the building at night, and it now seemed to him even more gloomy and uninviting. The door was as massive as the gate of a prison. It would have successfully withstood a siege; and the metal M. Nalot had stored in this ancient abode was certainly safe from thieves. Moreover, Mérindol was unable to discover any bell. There was a knocker, or rather a make believe one, but it was securely riveted to one of the panels of the door.

"Press the little knob under the copper plate on the left-hand side," said a voice behind Mérindol, who was trying his best to lift the knocker.

The voice was wonderfully sweet and musical. Mérindol, greatly surprised, turned round and found himself face to face with the fair stranger whom he had met at the corner of the Rue Montorgueil. She now seemed even prettier, but she did not look quite so young. "What, madame, is it you?" Mérindol unguardedly exclaimed, in his astonishment.

"Do you happen to know me, sir?" inquired the young woman, evidently much surprised by his remark.

"I haven't the honour; only five minutes ago I saw you for the first time," replied the young man, smiling.

"I did not notice you. You have business with Monsieur Nalot, probably. I doubt if he has arrived yet."

"I have an appointment with him for seven o'clock this morning."

"In that case, you will be sure to find him in his office."

"I think so. But, excuse the question, madame, do you also wish to see him? I ask you this because I will wait, of course, till you have finished your business with him."

"I am obliged to you, but there is nothing I wish to say to Monsieur Nalot just now."

"But you have come here. Do you reside in the house?"

"I am employed here, sir."

"Indeed ! So am I."

"You, sir ! That is strange. I never saw you before."

"I came here for the first time yesterday evening."

"Then it was you who came in the carriage with Monsieur Nalot."

"Yes, madame ; or should I say mademoiselle ?"

"I am not married, sir."

"Well then, mademoiselle, I am the manager of Monsieur Nalot's factory at St. Ouen. Temporarily, however, I shall reside here. You just told me that you were in Monsieur Nalot's employ. May I ask your occupation ?"

"I keep an account of all the goods received and sent away."

"Then I shall sometimes have the pleasure of meeting you, as I shall take Monsieur Nalot's place for a while."

"Then you will occupy his private office, on the first floor in the left wing, while my work is in the store-rooms in the basement. But I beg your pardon, sir," said the young woman, placing her finger on the copper button which served as a bell-knob, "it is getting late, and I must be at my post."

There were still many things that Mérindol wished to say to her, but the door flew open, and the young woman hastily entered the court-yard. Louis followed her, and found himself face to face with a strange-looking individual wearing a dark livery. He was a little, stunted, old humpback—a sort of Caliban or Quasimodo, and he, no doubt, seldom went outside for fear of being hooted by the street arabs. He darted a suspicious glance at the young woman who was crossing the court-yard, and who was already some little distance off, bowed to Louis Bertin with a surly air, and hastily closed the door which the latter had left open when he entered.

"Has Monsieur Nalot come yet ?" inquired Louis repressing his inclination to laugh.

"Yes, as he slept here," replied the gnome, sulkily. "And he has been waiting for you for an hour or more."

"Ah !" replied Mérindol, drily, "he told me to be here at seven o'clock precisely, and it is five minutes to."

"Then go up the left staircase at the end of the court-yard."

"I shall find someone to announce me, I suppose ?"

"I will warn the office attendant," growled the hunchback, giving two pulls at a bell-rope hanging from the wall. Mérindol turned his back on the doorkeeper and walked towards the same stairs he had ascended the evening before. On the first landing he met the office attendant who looked like a beadle, and he was immediately conducted to M. Nalot's private room. He found his employer seated behind a large writing table covered with papers, in a luxuriously furnished office. M. Nalot rose on seeing the young engineer, and advanced to meet him with outstretched hands. "Good morning, my young friend," he exclaimed, in a most affable tone. "You are punctuality itself, and I am glad of it, for I have

a deal of business to attend to to-day. Pray sit down. You stayed at a hotel last night, no doubt."

"Yes, sir," replied Mérindol, a little surprised at the interest M. Nalot seemed to take in his slightest actions, for the manufacturer was not in the habit of displaying so much solicitude concerning his subordinates.

"And perhaps you were not sorry of an opportunity to amuse yourself a little. One always likes to renew one's acquaintance with Parisian pleasures when one has been deprived of them for some time."

"I care very little for them, I assure you, sir."

"I know that you only think of your work. Still, you are young, and you formerly lived in Paris, I believe?"

"Yes; but I am not at all anxious to reside here now."

"Not as a bachelor, perhaps, but if you were married, you would no doubt change your mind."

"I don't think so; besides, I am not in a position to marry."

"You are not in a position to marry a dowerless bride, of course, though you are well able to earn your living. But I have great plans for you, and expect to see you at the head of a very handsome establishment before long."

"I am infinitely obliged to you, sir," said Mérindol, astonished by this overture, which was even more direct than those made the evening before. "The future you speak of would be very gratifying; still, I should not like to pledge myself lightly."

"Oh! it is understood that you will only marry an intelligent, pretty, and virtuous girl. You certainly have a right to exact all these attributes in the woman of your choice, and I shall soon ask you if you do not find them all in a certain person of my acquaintance." This time M. Nalot's meaning seemed so apparent that Mérindol did not know what to say. "I will insist no further just now," continued Gabrielle's father; "I should merely like to know if, in case you came into possession of a large fortune, you would have any objection to investing it in business."

"I certainly could not invest it to better advantage, especially if it was in a branch of business in which I could utilise my practical knowledge."

"As, for instance, in the business you are managing so admirably for me?" inquired M. Nalot.

"I should be only too happy to devote to it my time, energies, and—money, if I possessed any," replied Mérindol. "We are fast coming to the point," he thought. "He wishes to know if I should leave him in case he enriched me by a marriage. And yet I dare not hope that he really thinks of giving me his daughter."

"That is all I care to know," replied M. Nalot. "I am in a hurry, and I must explain as briefly as possible what you will have to do here for the next few days. The first thing will be to look over some accounts for me. There is a young woman here who keeps an account of the goods that come in and go out, and I should like to know if her books are correctly kept."

"She is not only a young, but a pretty woman, if I am not mistaken."

"What, are you acquainted with her?"

"I feel sure that I just met her, for on my reaching the gateway, and stopping to look for the bell, a young woman who came up, and saw my dilemma, pointed out the bell knob to me. We exchanged a few words. I told her who I was, and she remarked that she kept the stock account here."

"That is correct. You are probably surprised that I have intrusted a task of such importance to a woman."

"Especially to so young a woman."

"She is not as young as she looks. She is over twenty-five, and past that age, you know, a woman is considered to be an old maid ; it is a great pity, for this young person is very attractive, clever, and industrious. She has but one fault, in fact. She is so very bashful, which is a failing with a girl who ought to be looking for a husband. I hope, however, that she will some day meet a man worthy of her. Besides, it is quite possible that she will come into possession of a very handsome fortune later on. She has an uncle in America—an uncle who has made a great deal of money in California. It is true that he has never written to her since he left this country fifteen years ago ; but perhaps he will forget to make his will before he dies, and in that case my pretty clerk will prove a very desirable wife. But all that has nothing to do with the matter in hand. What I desire of you is this : the young woman performs her duties very well, and I don't think there is the slightest reason to doubt her honesty ; still, the position she holds is one of such importance that I should like you, not to watch her—there is no need of that—but to superintend her work a little. As I should not like to wound her feelings, I intrust the task to you, instead of an ordinary employé, who would make her feel his authority. Your education, manners, and disposition make you the very person to fulfil this delicate mission."

"Which, I trust, will be a short one, sir, for it is not at all in my line."

"Oh, ten days or a fortnight will suffice for you to collect the necessary materials for the report, which you will make to me—verbally, of course—for I have no intention of making this little inquiry an important matter ; and in the meantime, I don't wish you to confine yourself too closely here. I hope you will come occasionally to see how affairs progress at the factory. I never feel quite easy unless you are there. Besides, my wife and daughter would reproach me if you absented yourself entirely from St. Ouen."

"You are very kind, sir, and I will do my best to satisfy you," said Mérindol, reassured as to his employer's intentions by his concluding words.

"And now," resumed the manufacturer, glancing at his watch, "I will leave you to your new duties. My carriage must be waiting for me, and I have a deal to do this morning."

"Excuse me, sir, you speak of my new duties, but I do not very clearly understand of what they consist."

"Yes, I have neglected to enter into particulars, and now I haven't time to explain the organization of the establishment. But see Séranon, who is my cashier and factotum ; he will tell you all you want to know. The attendant will show you the way to his office. Still, as Séranon might bore you, I should advise you for the present to go down and have a talk with Mademoiselle Clémence ; let her explain her work and try to see for yourself how things are conducted. We will resume our conversation to-morrow morning, when you will understand much better what I desire of you. So, till to-morrow, my dear Bertin. Have you any commissions for St. Ouen ? I shall dine there this evening."

"Pray remember me to Madame and Mademoiselle Nalot."

"Rest assured that I will not forget your request ; if I did, the ladies would not fail to inquire after you."

Mérindol, delighted, bowed to his employer, and left the office, which had two doors, one of them being reserved for the private use of the manufacturer. The liveried giant in the ante-chamber offered to show Louis to the rooms which had been prepared for him ; but the young fellow asked to be conducted to M. Séranon's office.

The cashier occupied a sort of glass cage at the end of a room in which several clerks were at work ; a cage with a small window which was opened whenever anyone tapped upon the pane. Mérindol's guide rapped, and in the aperture there appeared a head bristling with stiff, grey hair. Beneath a pair of shaggy eyebrows gleamed two round tiger-like eyes ; betwixt them protruded a prodigious nose, fiery red, and a mouth stretched almost from ear to ear, revealing two rows of pointed, yellow teeth. The cashier's appearance was indeed so repulsive that Louis almost recoiled, but recovering himself, he said as politely as he could : "I was sent, sir, by Monsieur Nalot to arrange with you about—"

"I know," interrupted the cashier ; "you manage the factory at St. Ouen and you have come here to see if the accounts of that girl downstairs are all right. Well, how does that concern me ?"

"You don't seem to understand that Monsieur Nalot, our employer, has sent me—"

"He can send you where he pleases ; I don't care, but I have no time to waste in chattering."

"That means, of course, that you refuse to give me the information I need."

"Certainly it does. Good-day !" said the cashier, abruptly closing the window.

"Go to the deuce, you impudent scamp," said Mérindol out of patience.

"Don't mind him, sir. He has such attacks, at times," whispered the guide.

"I will have nothing more to do with the ill-bred fellow,"

growled Louis, and turning away, he walked towards a staircase, which led, he imagined, to the store-rooms below. He felt a desire to behold a more pleasing countenance.

But he had made a mistake, for this staircase conducted him to a little court-yard he had not yet seen. This yard was not only small and damp, but it was surrounded by high, gloomy walls which made it look like a well. These walls were covered with green moss, and weeds had sprung up between the paving stones. All around there was not a single window but there were several doors, some large enough to admit a loaded dray, others of medium size which did not seem to be often used, and smaller ones having a rather mysterious aspect. Mérindol, surprised, began to examine the spot inquisitively. He was beginning to think that this mercantile establishment was very strange. The cashier acted very much as if he would like to devour any one who spoke to him, and the court-yards resembled those of penitentiaries. As Louis was not at all anxious to catch rheumatism by remaining in this sort of cistern, he turned to remount the stairs, and he had already set one foot on the lowest step when the noise of a big key turning in a rusty lock made him look round. One of the small mysterious looking doors of the courtyard partially opened, and almost instantly closed upon a man who paused and blinked like an owl disconcerted by daylight. However, the new-comer promptly recovered himself and walked towards the stairs at the bottom of which Louis de Mérindol was standing. Suddenly two exclamations of surprise resounded, and Mérindol cried out : "What ! is it you ?" He had recognised the new-comer, as his friend Jean d'Autry whom he had left at midnight in Delphine de Guibray's drawing-room. "What the deuce are you doing here ?" he asked.

"And what the deuce are you doing here ?" retorted Jean, who seemed quite stupefied. Then before Mérindol could reply Jean burst into a hearty laugh and added : "What an idiot I am to ask you such a question ! You are here for the same purpose as myself of course. You need some money although you won a hundred louis last night, and so you have come here to get it, just as I have."

"Nothing of the kind, I assure you."

"Oh ! don't try to conceal it. There is nothing dishonourable about the matter, though the rate of interest here is rather high ; besides, I sha'n't go and tell your employer that you patronize the same usurer as myself."

"A usurer ?"

"Yes ; that beast, Séranon. You have already seen him, I suppose, though I fancied I should be the first customer here this morning, for I did not go to bed at all. The entertainment at Delphine's lasted till daybreak. I scarcely took time to dress afterwards and here I am."

"But how did you get in ?"

"In the usual way. You need not pretend innocence ; you

know old Rognas, who sells leeches in the Rue de la Grande-Truanderie, as well as I do ? ”

“ Old Rognas ! ” repeated Mérindol, in amazement.

“ What ! you pretend you don’t know him ? Have you already forgotten that one enters his shop whistling the air of *Marlborough is off to the wars*, and that at this signal a hideous face rises from behind a cask which must be full of rattlesnakes. It is the face of Rognas, that vile old wretch who spends his time among reptiles. You tell him you have come to purchase some leeches, having been recommended to him by an acquaintance at Reims. He asks your name and how many of the lovely creatures you want, and you answer : five, ten, or twenty, according as you need, five, ten or twenty thousand francs, for each leech represents a thousand franc note. He then leaves you alone in his den, locking you up for fear you might try to make your escape. Ten minutes later he reappears, and either tells you he has no leeches on hand, or else that what you want awaits you at the *dépôt* as he puts it. But the *dépôt* is of course Séranon’s office.”

“ Oh ! I’ve seen Séranon, but I don’t know Rognas.”

“ I thought as much, but you must have dealt with another intermediary—and have come in here by a different way. You were not taken down into a cellar, I presume ? ”

“ No, indeed.”

“ A cellar connected with a subterranean passage which leads into this court-yard. Rognas accompanied me as usual to the door yonder and opened it for me. But the most astonishing thing is finding you here. This is not the first time I have been here, but I never before met any one but a man-servant who looks like a drum-major. It’s he who conducts me to Séranon’s office and I’m surprised he is not here. Perhaps he is still in bed.”

“ So you came here to borrow money of a usurer ? ” inquired the young engineer, greatly troubled by this strange narrative.

“ You certainly don’t suppose I came to bring him money.”

“ Do you think that the usurer is the owner of this establishment ? ”

“ I know nothing about it, but Séranon must be rich enough to have a house of his own. But pray tell me about yourself ; if you haven’t come to borrow coin why are you here ? ”

Mérindol was greatly embarrassed. He realized the necessity of explaining his presence, but, on the other hand, he did not care to confess that the manufacturer who employed him was the proprietor of this establishment. He flattered himself that there must be some mistake, that Séranon probably did business on his own account, and that M. Nalot was not aware of his cashier’s disreputable transactions. “ The fact is,” he replied, “ my employer sent me here to make inquiries about some copper he thinks of buying.”

“ Oh, yes. Séranon must deal in all sorts of metals. So you did not come in through the leech-shop. The establishment probably has two entrances.”

“ I only know of one, in the Rue Mondétour, and—”

"Why, there's a woman!" suddenly exclaimed Jean d'Autry.

On hearing this exclamation Mérindol turned, and at the further end of the court-yard he perceived a woman whom he did not at first recognize.

She wore over her gown a long olive-tinted smockfrock, much like the blouses worn in a sculptor's studio, and she had entered the little yard by a door which must have communicated with the larger court. The long garment which enveloped her did not disguise her to such an extent as to prevent Mérindol from recognizing her after he had recovered a little from his surprise. It was Mademoiselle Clémence in working garb. She carried a bunch of keys in her hand, and she had already advanced some little distance into the court-yard before she perceived the young engineer standing at the foot of the staircase with a gentleman whom she had never seen before. She stopped short; and then, after a few seconds' hesitation, retreated to the door by which she had just arrived and waited, evidently for the stranger to go. At least Mérindol thought so, and his friend Jean must have been of the same opinion, for he remarked in an undertone: "I understand now why you are hanging about this cellar, and why Delphine de Guibray's little entertainments have lost their charm for you. So this is what you call purchasing copper. Well, as I haven't the slightest desire to interfere with your love affairs, I will leave you, especially as old Rognas must long since have announced my coming to Séranon, who is probably getting impatient; so good luck to you till we meet again." Jean thereupon flew up the stairs, three steps at a time, and disappeared.

Meanwhile Mademoiselle Clémence still remained at the door. She was evidently waiting for Mérindol to approach and speak to her, and, as he asked nothing better, he hastened across the court-yard and approached his charming subordinate, hat in hand. "I am very glad to meet you here, mademoiselle," he said, courteously: "in fact, I was looking for you, but I made a mistake in the staircase, which is not so surprising, as the arrangements of this establishment are certainly very intricate."

"So intricate that though I have been working here for a long time I do not yet know the place thoroughly."

"Do you live in the building?"

"No, sir. I reside in the Rue Montorgueil. I merely spend the day here. Have you seen our employer?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, and he spoke of you in the highest terms, telling me that he thoroughly appreciates the valuable services you render him."

"I am greatly obliged to him for his good opinion, but I don't understand why he should think it necessary to make me a subject of conversation."

"It was indispensable as we seem to be destined to come into daily contact while I remain here. Monsieur Nalot wishes to initiate me into all the different branches of business in which he is

engaged ; as regards his establishment here I have everything to learn, and can only do so by asking information of the persons familiar with the working of the place. He told me, it is true, that Monsieur Séranon would initiate me into everything ; but I have just made an unsuccessful attempt in that direction, and don't feel inclined to repeat it. Monsieur Séranon received me very ungraciously, so I decided to address myself to you."

"Then you wish me to show you what my daily work consists of?"

"Yes, mademoiselle ; but I would not like to cause you any inconvenience. I will accompany you, but pray, proceed with your duties as if I were not present."

"I will try, though I shall be obliged to give you some explanations—explanations which you probably would not think of asking ; for instance, as regards the arrangements of the house. This is the first time you have been here, but you are probably already aware of the ingenious manner in which our employer has utilized these old buildings."

"I have only noticed that there must be two entrances. One in the Rue Mondétour, and—"

"The other in the Rue de la Grande-Truanderie. I use the first one when I come in the morning, and leave by the other in the evening."

"You have to pass through this court-yard, then ?"

"No, indeed, I never set foot here. If you find me here now it is because while I was looking over some merchandise stored in a vault which ends at this door, I heard voices in a spot where I thought no one ever came. I had the key of the door, so I opened it to see that nothing irregular was going on. If this yard is ever used at all I really do not know for what purpose."

This declaration afforded Mérindol considerable satisfaction, for it proved that Clémence was ignorant of the suspicious practices of Séranon and his accomplice the dealer in leeches.

"Come, now, sir," added Clémence, in her musical voice, "and I will show you the store-rooms, and what I do there."

As she spoke she stepped aside to allow Mérindol to pass, and as soon as he had crossed the threshold she closed and locked the door. The corridor into which she had ushered the young man led to a kind of rotunda having a zinc roof, and divided into compartments by partitions of sheet iron. Each compartment was devoted to a particular use. One contained iron rails, symmetrically arranged ; another, sheets of copper, laid one above the other ; another, pig lead, in pyramidal piles. Others, moreover, were filled with heterogeneous articles, thrown in pell-mell—battered saucepans, old iron pots, cracked boilers, rusty bolts and hinges, indeed, piles of old household utensils. A dray which had been run over iron rails, was standing in the middle of the rotunda, and four men were engaged in unloading it. Mademoiselle Clémence drew a note-book from her pocket and made some entries in it. "Who are these men ?" asked Mérindol. "Their looks are by no means pleasant. Where does our employer pick up such faces, I wonder ?"

" You had better ask him, if you really wish to know," said Clémence, " I can't say ; and I should not presume to question Monsieur Nalot. They are certainly not the kind of men I should care to meet in a lonely spot after dark ; but I only see them here. They bring me merchandise, coming in by a gate which you have not yet seen, and which is reserved for their special use. Near this gate there is a weighing-machine. I have the dray weighed, and take a note of the gross weight ; then the goods being unloaded before me, I have them weighed separately, and due allowance being made for the weight of the dray I know exactly how many tons of goods I have received. In the same way I keep an account of the output, and every evening I send a report to Monsieur Nalot."

" And is that all ? "

" Oh, sir ! it is quite enough, for drays arrive and leave constantly, and I am kept busy from morning until night."

" You must be tired by the end of the day, unquestionably. It seems strange to me that our employer has not intrusted this fatiguing and difficult task to a man. I admit, though, that it is a question of confidence, for a dishonest person might conspire with the draymen to defraud Monsieur Nalot. However, he can rely upon your integrity and discretion, as you know all about his dealings in metals, where he obtains his merchandise and to whom he sells it."

" No, sir, I know nothing whatever about that."

" What ! the goods are brought here and taken away without your knowing where they come from or where they go ? "

" It may seem strange, but such is the case."

" But you certainly don't receive goods from anybody, and deliver them to anybody ? "

" I receive a paper every morning containing my instructions for the day, the loads I am to receive and deliver, and a list of the drays which will come, with their numbers. Only one comes at a time, and I am warned of its arrival by a bell in my office. To get here I have to follow a long corridor, and cross the court-yard on the other side of the rotunda. The driver gives me a number corresponding with one of those on my sheet of instructions. As I have the keys of the rotunda, I admit him and wait until the dray has been emptied or loaded. When it is all over, I return to my office to repeat the operation twenty minutes afterwards, perhaps."

" And apart from the work you never have occasion to enter into conversation with any of these draymen ? "

" No, sir ; and I assure you I have no desire to talk with them. Besides, they have unquestionably received precise instructions, for they never say a word to me, nor do they even speak with each other."

" That's strange," replied Méindol. " In the factory at St. Ouen I often talk with my workmen."

" But there is nothing to hinder you from questioning these men if you like, sir. I am a woman, and I don't dare."

"That is true. I ought to have done that, instead of wearying you with my questions. But it's not too late."

The young engineer now advanced toward the draymen, who went on with their work without evincing any consciousness of his presence. There were four of them, all old and ugly ; and Mérindol, who was in the habit of superintending young and intelligent workmen, wondered where these hideous scamps, who looked brutified by drink, could have been picked up. The youngest was at least fifty years of age.

"Where have you come from, my good fellows ?" he inquired.

There was one who raised his head and shrugged his shoulders, but the others did not even look up. "Are you deaf ?" asked Mérindol, and receiving no response he caught hold of the man nearest him by the arm and shook him vigorously. "It's you I'm speaking to !" he cried, angrily this time.

"I can hear," growled the man. "Well, what then ?"

"I ask you who has sent us this old lead."

"It isn't my business to tell you. Apply to the governor."

"You are insolent, eh ? Get out of here, or I'll thrash you."

"Don't try it," retorted the scamp, drawing from his pocket a long pointed knife, which he opened.

"I beg of you, sir—" began the young woman.

On hearing her voice Mérindol regained the calmness he had momentarily lost. "You are right, mademoiselle," he said. "I will have this rascal dismissed, but I must not compromise myself with him. I will speak to you by-and-by."

And he did not open his lips again until after the dray was unloaded. Clémence, more troubled, perhaps, than she was willing to admit, made the necessary entries in her note-book ; and when the strange fellows had finished their work, she allowed them to go off without a word. The dray was dragged out into the court-yard, and then one of the men whistled. A gate communicating with a narrow street flew open, and a strong horse was seen held by a man as repulsive in appearance as the four others. Then the gate closed upon the party as if by enchantment, just like the door through which Jean d'Autry had so unexpectedly appeared. "Well, sir, you must now understand the nature of my duties," remarked Clémence. "Would you like to see my books now ?"

"No, no," replied Mérindol. "I have seen quite enough to be convinced that extraordinary things go on here. What do you think about it, mademoiselle ?"

"I will not venture to express an opinion."

"But you must certainly have one. It is impossible that you should not have asked yourself—as I am doing at this moment—if the goods received here have not been stolen."

"Oh ! I can't believe that Monsieur Nalot is dishonest."

"But his attention may be so engrossed by more important enterprises that he is ignorant of what is done by certain dishonest subordinates, such as his cashier, that Séranon who looks very

like the leader of a band of thieves. I am satisfied that the rascal practices usury. The young man you saw with me just now told me so. Moreover, there is an air of mystery about everything here ; and I don't like the way in which the business seems to be conducted. I must have an explanation with Monsieur Nalot, this evening, even if I am obliged to go to St. Ouen to find him. But first, mademoiselle, I beg that you will tell me all you know. You barely know me, and you distrust me, perhaps ; but I assure you that I am an honourable man, and that if I had any doubt of Monsieur Nalot's integrity, I should not remain in his employ."

"I believe you, sir ; and I will not hide from you that I have more than once thought of leaving his establishment, though I have earned a very comfortable living here for six months past."

"Six months past !" repeated Mérindol, struck by a sudden recollection.

"Yes, sir," replied the young woman. "I came here last November, and after seeing Monsieur Nalot I was intrusted with my present duties by Monsieur Séranon on the very first day."

"You knew Monsieur Nalot previously, I presume ?"

"No, sir. I had never even seen him before."

"May I venture to ask you who first recommended you to his notice ?"

"A person in his employ with whom I was but slightly acquainted, but if you would like to know the particulars I will tell you how everything happened. I am not ashamed of my past, and besides, I feel confidence in you."

"You do right to trust me, mademoiselle, as I hope to prove to you by-and-by. So you met a gentleman who was employed in this house ?"

"No, not in this house, though I believe Monsieur Nalot employed him elsewhere—at the factory, perhaps. At all events, I have never seen him working here. He is called Corraille."

"What ! Corraille, the new overseer Monsieur Nalot hired recently at St. Ouen—a man whom I heartily dislike, and who looks quite as villainous as the draymen with whom you have to deal every day ?"

"His looks are not in his favour certainly. However, rather more than six months ago he began to take his meals at a little restaurant where—where I served as a waitress."

"You, mademoiselle ; you were—"

"A servant in a little restaurant near the Palais Royal ?"

"Indeed," cried Mérindol, as a sudden light broke upon him. "But, pray, proceed with your story. So you saw this man every day—"

"Yes, and he seemed to take an interest in my lot, which was certainly hard enough just then. I had only accepted the situation for want of a better one. However, my employers were kind-hearted people, who understood that I was born for something better than the menial position to which unexpected misfortunes

had reduced me. They ventured to tell Monsieur Corraille that, after having served a long time as under-teacher in a boarding-school, I had preferred to earn my living by manual work, rather than misconduct myself."

"Under-teacher in a boarding-school!" repeated Mérindol, becoming more and more surprised.

"Yes; I served in that capacity twelve years. I am now twenty-seven, and I was only fifteen when I was first given a home by the worthy woman who kept the school. She brought me up as if I had been her own daughter. I was soon able to assist her in teaching the children intrusted to her; and I should never have left her had she not died last year. I then found myself almost without money or friends, for I had led a very secluded life. The girls who attended the school were of modest position, and could not render me assistance in securing a position as governess; however, the mother of one of them offered to take me into her employ, and I was only too glad to accept her offer. Later on, she strongly urged me not to refuse Corraille's offer to find me a more suitable and lucrative position. I accepted it, and you know the rest."

Mérindol had listened to this narrative with unconcealed emotion, and after a brief pause he abruptly asked: "Did you ever know a person called Mongeorge?"

"Mongeorge," murmured Clémence, with a changed expression.
"Yes, that name—"

"Is that of a man who was your devoted friend, and who paid dearly for his devotion?"

"Who can have told you that?"

"I know everything. I know that your name is Cécile, that your childhood was spent in a château in the Ardennes—a château which belonged to the Count de Porcien."

"My benefactor! Ah, how I have wept his loss, and prayed for him!"

"Driven away by Monsieur de Porcien's relatives, you were sheltered by a worthy man whose sense of justice revolted against such iniquity—by a notary who had charge of the count's will—a will which made you his sole legatee. And this unfortunate man, Mongeorge, led astray by his affection for you, committed a crime and the law showed him no mercy."

"I would have given my life to save him; but what could I do? I was a child when I was told he had been sent to Toulon—"

"Where he remained ten years."

"Is he dead?" the young woman asked, in a husky voice.

"No; he is alive and at liberty."

"Thank God! He was pardoned, then?"

"No; he succeeded in making his escape, and I know that he has atoned for his fault by the most irreproachable conduct. He succeeded in reaching a foreign country, and has since resided there; but he has never ceased to think of you."

"Do you suppose that I have forgotten him?" exclaimed Cécile.

" Well he has returned to France at the risk of recapture, for if he were recognised, he would be sent back to the galleys to end his days there. If he has run such a terrible risk it is because he is looking for you."

" Does he know that I am still living, then ? "

" He has only been aware of it a short time. All trace of you was lost after the Count de Porcien's death. I myself went to the Ardennes, several years afterwards, to make inquiries about you, for I had promised Mongeorge to try and find you."

" I had taken refuge in Paris. I came on foot, and should have died here, had not Providence led me to the little boarding-school where I was so kindly sheltered."

" And it must be Providence that has brought about our meeting so soon after my seeing Mongeorge, whom I left only a few hours ago. He told me that a man from the Ardennes had seen you in an eating-house near the Palais Royal, and as soon as you began to relate your story, the truth flashed upon me. But why did the people of the restaurant refuse to tell Mongeorge where you had gone on leaving them ? "

" I had begged them to keep my whereabouts secret. They told me that a gentleman had been there to inquire about me, and I thanked them for their refusal to give him any information. I thought the man was an enemy—that is, the same person who came into possession of the fortune which the Count de Porcien intended to bequeath to me."

" The Count de Porcien's heir ? " exclaimed Mérindol. " Does he know where you are ? "

" I think not, " replied Cécile, " but I am sure that he has been looking for me a long time. It was because I believed that he hated me so intensely, that I fled shortly after my benefactor's death. My impression always was that this man, fearing that the count's real will might be discovered, wanted to find me to put me out of the way. I trusted, however, that if I disappeared he would imagine me to be dead, and then abandon his pursuit."

" It was for this reason, I suppose, that you changed your name."

" Yes ; my real name is Cécile, and I took that of Clémence."

" Had you no other name ? "

" No, sir, I never knew my parents, " replied the young woman, blushing.

" Excuse me, mademoiselle, I did not intend to wound you. I had entirely forgotten what Mongeorge told me about you."

" I always thought, " said Mademoiselle Cécile, as we shall henceforth call her, " that the Count de Porcien must have taken me under his protection but a short time after my birth. I remember no other face but his, and that of my nurse—a peasant woman of Brie, at whose house he used to visit me ; and I was only three years old when he took me to the château where I remained until his death."

" Excuse me, " said Mérindol after a brief silence ; " but did the

count ever give you to understand either directly or indirectly that you were his daughter or grand-daughter?"

"No, sir," replied Cécile. "He treated me like his own child, but I do not think I was, for in that case, understanding his character and feelings as I do now, I am sure that he would have acknowledged me."

"You are mistaken, perhaps, not as regards his generosity of heart, but as regards the law in such matters. You are probably not aware that an illegitimate child, even duly acknowledged, inherits but a fourth part of his or her father's property; whereas the father, having no legitimate issue, is at liberty to leave all he possesses to a stranger should he choose. The count may have thought that it was to your advantage not to be acknowledged."

"He knew very well that I should have preferred the honour of bearing his name to the advantage of possessing his fortune," replied Cécile, firmly.

"I don't doubt it, mademoiselle," said Mérindol, struck by these proud words. "But if, by an unexpected stroke of good fortune, the real will should be found, it would be your duty to accept the count's legacy, if only out of respect for his memory."

"I do not know what I should do in that case, but I hope it will never happen. The heirs-at-law would certainly kill me."

"You would not lack defenders."

"There is certainly one upon whose devotion I could rely implicitly, but he is not in a position to render me effectual aid."

"Mongeorge! You are very much mistaken, mademoiselle. If you would consent to accompany him to a foreign land, he would gladly provide for your future. Would you object to seeing him before he leaves Paris?"

"I should be happy to have an opportunity of thanking him, and telling him that I have never ceased to think of him."

"Very well, mademoiselle, I promise you that I will bring you together in a few days' time. Not here, however. This place seems very suspicious to me, although I only arrived a couple of hours ago. I presume that you do not care to remain here."

"Oh! I say to myself every evening that I will not return on the morrow; but I have so far lacked the courage to carry out my purpose. I should leave unhesitatingly, however, if I had an opportunity of earning an honest living, for I have undergone perfect persecution here. Would you believe it, ever since I accepted this situation I have had to submit to the most persistent and unwelcome attentions on the part of certain employés. Monsieur Corraile, who was the means of my coming here, informed me at the expiration of the first week that he should be glad to marry me. He told me he was well-off, and that if we married, Monsieur Nalot would give both of us very lucrative positions. Annoyed beyond endurance, I wrote to Monsieur Nalot, making a complaint. He did not answer my letter, but the scoundrel ceased to torment me. However, other suitors came forward. I soon received the visit of a clerk who had

been appointed to superintend my work. He was a young man and less repulsive than Corraille, but I disliked him almost as much. He proposed to me ; I refused his offer, and after persevering for a few days, he also disappeared, another man taking his place."

"As a superintendent?"

"Yes, and as a suitor also. The result was the same, and I thought I was finally rid of superintendents when—"

"When I presented myself," interrupted Mérindol, laughing.

"Oh, you don't resemble the others in the least."

"I shall at least have the merit of not presenting myself as a suitor for your hand, although Monsieur Nalot advised me to do so."

"Is it possible? What, you as well?"

"I did not at first understand the meaning of his words, or rather I misunderstood them; but I see clearly now what he meant. It was to you he alluded, and I wonder what can be his object in making you marry—"

"I, myself, am quite ignorant on that point," replied Cécile, who, at this moment, was interrupted by the sound of a bell. "A dray is coming," she added, hastily, whereupon Mérindol rejoined :

"It isn't worth while that the draymen should see me. I am going, and shall return to deliver you. By to-morrow I shall have seen both Mongeorge and Monsieur Nalot. I want to clear up all this mystery."

V

THE day seemed very long to Mérindol, for he spent almost the whole of it in running about after people he could not find. On repairing to the little hotel in the Rue Trouchet, he learnt that Mongeorge had already gone out, and would not return until late in the evening. Jean d'Autry, from whom Louis hoped to obtain some further information respecting the Count de Porcien, was also away from home, and his servant did not know when he would be back. In former years Jean had been in the habit of breakfasting at the Café de la Paix, where Mérindol next repaired ; but though he waited some time, his friend failed to put in an appearance. Even Delphine de Guibray had gone out and was not to be found ; and the attempts which Louis made to obtain M. de Porcien's address from her maid proved altogether unsuccessful. Although he offered the girl a louis for some information about the count, she feigned ignorance like a well-trained maid, and Mérindol finally relinquished his efforts. He whiled away the rest of the afternoon in the Champs Elysées hoping to espy Delphine's carriage among the crowd of equipages ; and this last venture yielding no better result than the others he finally resolved upon a decisive step.

The time had come for a full explanation with M. Nalot. Mérindol, since entering his employ, had never thought of inquiring into the manufacturer's antecedents, connections, or affairs. He had taken him for precisely what he appeared to be, an intelligent man of the middle classes, devoted to his business, and very proud of his fortune—more occupied with his speculations than with his family, but withal a kind husband and father. However, during the past few hours Mérindol had seen and heard so many strange things that he was beginning to doubt the integrity of this M. Nalot who had a usurer for his Paris factotum, and who employed such degraded-looking men. This doubt was very painful for Louis, for M. Nalot was Gabrielle's father. Mérindol still believed that the shameful goings on, he had just discovered, took place without the manufacturer's knowledge, but he felt it his duty to inform M. Nalot on the point without delay, and he was also determined to solve at any cost the mystery that surrounded his employer's intentions with regard to Cécile. Was it he who had organized a sort of conspiracy to compel her to marry even against her will ? Everything seemed to indicate it, but then what could be the manufacturer's object ? Was it an interested one ? The remarks he had made that morning seemed to show that

he hoped to share with Cécile's husband, some fortune which was likely to fall to her. The talk about the Californian uncle was all humbug. Cécile had no relatives ; though she might be acknowledged as the Count de Porcien's legatee in the event of the missing will being found.

The result of Mérindol's meditations was that, after dining near the Madeleine, he took a cab to St. Ouen intending to interview M. Nalot that very night. The pavilion he had formerly occupied was merely separated from the villa by the length of the garden ; but it had a separate gateway, so that Mérindol could go in without being seen, and dress before appearing in the presence of the ladies. His windows overlooked the garden, and as he proceeded with his toilet, he glanced out occasionally in the hope of seeing Madame Nalot and her daughter taking a stroll, as they were in the habit of doing every evening in summer. However, he only perceived some of the servants, who, to his great surprise, were in full livery, and evinced great excitement as if some distinguished visitors were expected. The verandah was moreover profusely decorated with flowers, and all the drawing-room windows were open. It really seemed as if some kind of *soirée* was to be given, and Louis finally asked himself whether it would not be advisable to postpone his conversation with M. Nalot, after all.

He had almost made up his mind to defer the explanation, when he saw the garden gate, near the river, open to admit Corraille, the overseer, who was dressed in his Sunday best, with a silk hat and black kid gloves. Mérindol had a very poor opinion of this fellow, and, surprised by his appearance at such an hour, he remained on the watch. The overseer stealthily proceeded as far as the conservatory, and then hastily retracing his steps he sat down on a garden bench as if waiting for somebody's arrival. A few minutes later, Louis, more and more surprised, saw M. Nalot emerge from the house, and walk towards the overseer, who rose up with servile eagerness, and advanced with uncovered head.

The pair then walked down the path together, and although Mérindol could not hear a word of what they said, he watched them closely. M. Nalot's gestures were frequent and imperious. He was evidently giving orders, or perhaps reproaching his subordinate, who bowed humbly after each remark addressed to him. This went on during several minutes, and finally Corraille took his leave, bowing to the ground.

M. Nalot left alone, then lighted a cigar, and walked in the direction of the conservatory which was but a short distance from Mérindol's pavilion. Louis decided that this was a good time to show himself, and accordingly he hurried down into the garden.

Although M. Nalot frowned slightly on perceiving him, he quickly recovered himself, and his greeting was as cordial as usual. "I did not expect the pleasure of seeing you here this evening," he said, offering Louis his hand ; "but you are none the less welcome."

"I availed myself of the kind permission you gave me to come here. My presence in Paris did not seem necessary, and I felt that I owed Madame Nalot an apology for my unceremonious departure yesterday."

"My wife and Gabrielle did not expect to see you so soon, but your coming will be an agreeable surprise," replied M. Nalot. "We dined alone to-day, and the ladies are now dressing, for we expect a visitor—a person they have never met before. However, we are on sufficiently intimate terms for me to introduce you to all my friends, and besides, we can have a quiet chat until our visitor arrives. What have you been doing to-day? Are you pleased with your new position?"

"I wished to speak to you about it, and I must frankly confess that I have not yet been able to discover in what my duties consist. I went to Monsieur Séranon's office, but I could obtain no information from him. In fact, he received me in a very insulting manner."

"I can't understand that. Perhaps you saw him when he was engaged with other persons. Cashiers don't like to be taken from their duties, mine especially."

"Excuse me, sir, but he was alone. I began by saying that you had sent me to him, and he replied that he was not employed to teach me my business, and that he had no time to waste. When I ventured to insist, he shut his window in my face."

"Indeed! Séranon is an excellent accountant, very useful in all respects, but he lacks politeness and he has a very bad temper. There are days when no one can approach him, and at such times I myself carefully avoid him. I ought to have found out what mood he was in before sending you to him."

"Oh, I attach little importance to his reception, but I shall not expose myself to such affronts in future."

"Oh! I shall take him in hand to-morrow, and when you meet him again you will find him quite mealy mouthed; I know how to bring him to his senses. But let us speak of the other matter I intrusted to you. Did you see Mademoiselle Clémence?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mérindol, who then gave his employer an account of the incidents which had taken place in the rotunda, duly mentioning his altercation with the drayman who had threatened him with a knife. M. Nalot expressed his astonishment, and remarked that the carters were perfect brutes, almost always the worse for liquor. "Has Mademoiselle Clémence ever had any difficulty with them before?" he added.

"No," answered Mérindol, "she never speaks to them."

"Yes, I understand," rejoined M. Nalot, "she is proud; and she is quite right in being so. In fact, she is above her modest position. I feel convinced that she would insure the happiness of any man who did not attach too much importance to certain things one can dispense with. Her greatest misfortune is her ignorance if her parentage."

"She is an orphan, is she not?" asked Mérindol, diplomatically.

"The fact is she was a foundling, and in some people's eyes that is a disgrace. Would it be an insuperable objection to you?"

"To me!" repeated Mérindol in pretended astonishment, although he rightly guessed what the manufacturer was aiming at. "I really don't see what I have to do with the matter."

"I think you could easily win her if you chose. The question is whether she pleases you."

"Why, I have never seen beauty comparable with hers, and she is as well-bred and refined as if she were the child of wealthy parents; but—"

"But she has no fortune, nor have you. This would be a serious objection, but although this young woman will bring no dowry to her husband, she will bring him what are called expectations—very brilliant expectations."

"You mentioned an uncle residing in California, I believe."

"Yes, but I did not tell you all. I have good reason to believe that this uncle will leave her his entire fortune; and I know he is very ill. In fact, it is more than likely that he is dead by now."

"That alters the situation," murmured Mérindol, skilfully playing the part of a man captivated by brilliant prospects.

"That is to say, our dear Clémence will become a splendid catch," exclaimed M. Nalot. "What a chance you have! She does not suspect the good fortune awaiting her, and would feel only too happy to become the wife of a clever, young engineer who will soon be my partner. So, my dear fellow, you have only to marry her if you are so disposed. A little courting and the matter will be settled."

Mérindol pretended to reflect, and his attitude and silence seemed to indicate that he found the proposal a tempting one, and only hesitated for appearance's sake. "Well, what do you say?" inquired Nalot. "Shall I ask the hand of the young lady for you? I think it would be better for you to plead your cause in person; but if it embarrasses you—"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Mérindol, "but you just told me that Clémence knew nothing whatever about her parentage. How does it happen, then, that she has an uncle? Foundlings have no relatives."

Nalot bit his lips. He realised that he had made a blunder; but he was not easily disconcerted. "Provided she gets the money, what difference does it make whether it comes from an uncle or a stranger?" he asked. "I only mentioned an uncle because I did not think the time had come to enter into particulars. The fact is, Mademoiselle Clémence is the illegitimate child of a rich man, who intends to leave her all his property when he dies."

"Indeed! why hasn't he ever paid any attention to her before? He must know that she is living as he proposes making a will in her favour. He is rather tardy in showing his interest in her, it seems to me."

" Better late than never," laconically replied M. Nalot, who did not seem inclined to enter into further particulars."

" All this seems the stranger to me," remarked Louis, " as Mademoiselle Clémence told me the story of her life—"

" Indeed ! May I ask what she said to you ?"

" I have no desire to conceal it. She informed me that she had formerly served as a waitress in a restaurant, frequented by that man Corraillé, the overseer."

" Yes ; it was Corraillé who recommended her to me. He had been struck by her gracefulness and intelligence, and could not bear to see her reduced to such a menial position."

" I asked her how she came to accept such a position, and she told me all her misfortunes," said Mérindol, who then briefly recapitulated Mademoiselle Cécile's statements. He was prudent enough not to allude to Mongeorge's escape from Toulon, but carried away by a sudden impulse he could not help adding : " And to think that the author of this poor girl's misfortunes is now living a gay life in Paris."

" Did she tell you so ?" inquired M. Nalot, eagerly.

" No, sir ; but by a strange chance I met the present Count de Porcien yesterday evening."

" Would it offend you if I asked you where ?"

" In a rather disreputable place, I confess. Some old friends took me, rather against my will, to the house of an actress who seems to be on the best of terms with this Count de Porcien. I met him at her house, where he goes to play cards. What surprised me was, that on hearing my name, he spoke of you. He knew that I was connected with your factory at St. Ouen."

" That surprises me even more than it did you," exclaimed M. Nalot. " I know the man's worth very well ; but he knows very little about me. I cannot imagine how he obtained this information. However, you have told me that you are aware that this Porcien inherited his cousin's property. The old count had made a will—which he unfortunately neglected to sign. And but for this oversight, Cécile would have been his sole legatee."

" There seems to be no doubt of that."

" Ah, well, my dear Bertin, I can now speak to you without the slightest reticence, concerning the plan I have formed to insure your happiness. I now know your character as well as if I had spent my life with you. You are one of those persons whose worth is apparent at once. I often asked myself what I could do for you. I first thought of increasing your salary, but I felt that this would be an inadequate reward for your services—"

" I am greatly flattered by your good opinion of me," interrupted Mérindol, " but I am amply paid already."

" You are too modest. You are not made for a subordinate. You have that practical knowledge of our business which neither I, nor the majority of those who own similar establishments, possess. What is needed is to place you at the head of an immense concern of this kind. But one thing—money."

"Money however is everything. It is impossible to succeed in any career without it."

"Granted; and I first thought of giving you an interest in my enterprises, but I afterwards decided that it would be better to begin by insuring your independence by a marriage, which would enable you to choose your position yourself. Chance having put me in possession of an important secret, I resolved to take advantage of it to enrich you."

"And this secret is connected with Mademoiselle Cécile's inheritance, I suppose. Will you allow me to inquire how and when you learned it?"

"About six months ago; and I then turned my attention to improving Mademoiselle Cécile's position. As for telling you how the secret came into my possession, I cannot do that yet, for reasons that I will explain later on and which you will understand perfectly well. I do not even mean to disclose the good news to Cécile until all obstacles have been successfully removed."

"The person who is now in possession of the Porcien property will naturally not relinquish it without a struggle."

"Oh, there will be a lawsuit, of course, but he will lose his case. The authenticity of the late count's will is uncontested. It will suffice to compare the handwriting to prove that it was written by the late count, and opportunities for comparison will not be wanting, as there are at least twenty letters of his in the custody of the clerk of the court by which that notary was tried—"

"But the person in possession may have spent all, or part of the money, and as he honestly believed himself the rightful owner, he cannot be compelled to make restitution."

"You need have no fears on that score. By far the greater part of the property is land which the Porcien you saw yesterday still possesses and which he will have to give up—"

"If the missing will is produced. It is still in existence then? Have you seen it?"

M. Nalot hesitated for an instant, and then answered, evasively: "I know where it is."

"Excuse me, sir, for insisting; but really, all this is so very extraordinary—"

"Oh, I can readily understand that you wish to obtain all possible information before coming to a decision, and I consent to tell you that the will is in the hands of a man who found it on the day following the Count de Porcien's death. This man is a rather disreputable character; and though I am not at liberty to disclose his name, I can tell you that he was working at the château when he found the will."

"He must be a scoundrel, for he had only to produce the original will to repair an act of shameful injustice."

"No doubt, but being unscrupulous, he wished to derive some profit by his discovery. He makes no secret of that. He even boasts of having offered to sell the document to the deceased count's

heir ; but he probably set too high a price on it, for they did not come to an agreement. Thereupon the man changed his tactics, and devised a rather clever scheme. Cécile was then only fourteen, but she would soon reach a marriageable age—”

“ And the scamp flattered himself that he could then induce her to marry him, I suppose ? ”

Yes, that was his plan. Although rather old and not at all handsome, he relied upon her inexperience and poverty to persuade her to marry him, and he intended to lay claim to the property in his wife's name. However, her sudden disappearance from Vouviers upset his plans. After seeking her on all sides during thirteen years, a strange chance brought him face to face with her. He questioned her adroitly, and as soon as all his doubts, as to her identity, were dispelled, he again tried his old plan. Finding, however, that the girl would never consent to become his wife, he came to me and unblushingly told me his story, and inquired if I knew of any one competent to obtain Mademoiselle Cécile's hand and willing to sign an agreement to pay a handsome sum for the production of the missing will. My first impulse was to turn the scoundrel out of my office ; but when I threatened to denounce him for this attempt at blackmailing, he coolly replied that if the authorities were set upon his track he would burn the will, and thus ruin the orphan girl for ever. It was the height of impudence I admit, and yet, his words made me pause and reflect. I said to myself that if I refused to help him, he would find plenty of less scrupulous persons, and that Cécile might be induced to marry some good-looking but unprincipled man introduced to her by this scoundrel. So would it not be better for me to select a worthy man for her, and allow him to negotiate with the finder of the will ? First of all, as I wished to test her character, I offered her employment which she accepted. I am quite sure of her integrity, and I can fearlessly propose her as a wife to a man whom I highly esteem.”

Mérindol started on hearing these concluding words, though he was not unprepared for them. He was by no means in love with Cécile, having bestowed his heart on another, but he said to himself that she must not be prevented from securing possession of the property which her benefactor had bequeathed to her. Thus, it was of the utmost importance to ascertain who held the will, and to obtain information on that point it was advisable to feign indecision. In such a case a little diplomacy was certainly no crime. “ I am deeply grateful, sir,” said Louis, “ for the interest you take in my welfare, and the offer you make me. I don't reject it, by any means, but pray remember that the consent of Mademoiselle Cécile is indispensable, and that she has not yet been consulted.”

“ You shall consult her yourself, my dear fellow ; and I am sure that you will succeed in gaining her consent.”

“ But I must know the exact conditions on which this man will agree to give up the will, for it must be delivered to her.”

“ Yes, certainly, when the proper time comes ; but he doesn't

wish to treat with her. He insists upon having the written promise of her future husband. You might pledge yourself to share with him the fortune which the document bequeaths to your wife. The money would not be payable until she came into possession. As Cécile would certainly not think of having it settled personally on herself—and besides she could not do so as you would already be married—you would be able to dispose of it."

"Then she is not to be told of her unexpected good fortune until after her marriage?"

"No, that would not be advisable. I am satisfied that she would marry you just the same; but it is as well to guard against a woman's fickleness."

This time Mérindol could hardly restrain his indignation; still playing his part, however, he replied: "It is also necessary, sir, for me to take some precautions against this man, for if I married without satisfying myself of the existence and validity of this will, I should run a great risk of being disappointed. Can you show me the document, and allow me to examine it?"

The thrust was direct; but the manufacturer received it without wincing. "No," he replied, "the will is not in my possession, and the finder certainly won't consent to trust me with it."

"Then I must ask you to arrange an interview between him and me."

M. Nalot reflected for a moment, and then answered: "As matters now stand, my dear Bertin, I feel sure that I can trust you implicitly, so I will not conceal from you that the man who holds Cécile's future in his hand is our new overseer—Corraille."

"Corraille!" exclaimed Mérindol; "I was right, then, when I told you that he was a villain!"

"You are too severe," replied M. Nalot. "Corraille is hardly an honourable man, but remember he never had your training. He was formerly a poor devil of a locksmith and barely earned his living. A missing document, the importance of which he understood, for he is a shrewd fellow, came into his possession, and he determined to derive profit from it. This idea, which would never have occurred to you or me, seemed perfectly natural to him. He had found a will, and he wanted to sell it exactly as he would have sold any object he might have picked up in the street. Oh! I don't approve of such principles, I assure you; still it is true that Corraille, solely by his industry, managed to acquire technical knowledge and become overseer in a large factory at Reims. It was there that I found him, and his employer recommended him to me in the highest terms."

"That is more than I could do."

"Yes, I know that you were not satisfied with him, and I just gave him a good lecture for the want of punctuality you mentioned to me. He has promised to behave better in future. I almost forgive him for his apparent neglect, because I know that he is so anxious about his great scheme. I did not positively tell him I

had thought of you, but he half guessed it when he learnt that you were going to work at our Paris establishment. He feels certain that you can win the heiress, if you choose, and he counts upon making a satisfactory bargain with you. And now, my dear Bertin, decide as you think best. I felt that I should render you a service by offering you this chance, and I am a little interested in the matter as we could unite our capital, and engage in some large enterprises. But my chief desire is to insure your happiness, and that of a charming young woman. So I hope you will decide to negotiate with the possessor of the will ; you can, of course, break off all connection with him after the matter is settled, which will not take long. Think it over. There is no hurry. We can resume the conversation at some other time for I now see my wife and daughter approaching. Let us go and meet them."

The ladies came forward. Gabrielle's cheeks were rosy, but she did not smile; and Louis detected sadness, or rather anxiety in her blue eyes. Madame Nalot, however, was absolutely radiant, and her beauty had never seemed more striking. She had looked so different the evening before that Mérindol wondered what was the cause of the transformation. "My dear," said M. Nalot, addressing his wife, "our friend Bertin has felt so bored in Paris during the last twenty-four hours that he could endure it no longer. He missed us, and so here he is."

"Monsieur Bertin's coming is very opportune," replied the creole. "We shall not be alone this evening, as you expect a—a friend who will be very happy to make his acquaintance. Besides," she continued, while Louis bowed, "I am sure that Monsieur Bertin takes a great interest in Gabrielle's welfare, and I am glad to be able to tell him that her happiness is now assured. Yes, indeed, the dear girl will now soon be married."

Both Mérindol and Gabrielle turned pale.

"Yes," exclaimed M. Nalot, "I shall be able to introduce you to my prospective son-in-law this evening ; he bears one of the noblest names in France."

"This evening !" exclaimed Mérindol.

"I am surprised that he has not already arrived. True, St. Ouen is a long distance from the Champs Elysées, but he has superb horses—a pair of Russian trotters worth as least ten thousand francs. Are you a connoisseur in horse-flesh ?"

"By no means, sir," stammered Mérindol, stunned by the dreadful news. How was it that a wealthy nobleman was willing to marry a manufacturer's daughter? He could not be in love with her, for where could he have ever seen her?—she and her step-mother having led such a secluded life at St. Ouen. While Louis was reflecting M. Nalot resumed : "Ah ! here he comes. I hear the sound of carriage-wheels. Let us go indoors. It is best for the reception to take place in the drawing-room. Come, Bertin."

The engineer would willingly have fled to escape the misery of meeting his more fortunate rival ; but a glance from Gabrielle, an

entreating glance which seemed to say, "Do not desert me," made him resolve to submit to the ordeal. He therefore accompanied the trio to the villa, and remarked that although Madame Nalot walked on by her husband's side, chatting gaily, she never once took her eyes off her step-daughter. "That woman hates Gabrielle," said Louis to himself, "and it seems to me she takes a strange pleasure in making me as wretched as possible. It is probably on account of the conversation I had with her yesterday."

At the foot of the steps, the manufacturer's wife paused to give an order to a servant. M. Nalot had gone forward, and his daughter, before entering the house, was able to whisper hastily to the young engineer: "I must speak to you. Meet me to night at two o'clock in the garden." Then she passed on.

Her father was already in the drawing-room, adjusting his cravat, and trying to assume a majestic attitude for the reception of his future son-in-law. Madame Nalot had scarcely had time to seat herself on the sofa, and Gabrielle was proceeding towards the piano to conceal her embarrassment, when the folding doors were thrown wide open, and a liveried lackey announced in a loud voice: "The Marquis de Mérindol!"

Had a thunderbolt fallen at the young engineer's feet he would not have been more astonished. He could not believe his ears, and he gazed with all his eyes at the person who had so audaciously appropriated his name and title. The new comer was on the wrong side of fifty and he had an angular face, a squat figure and broad shoulders. His whole appearance suggested that of a street porter. However, M. Nalot welcomed him right cordially, and led him to Madame Nalot, who greeted him with her most gracious smile. Then came the turn of Gabrielle, who was as pale as death, and unable to utter a word in response to the fulsome compliments bestowed upon her by this clown rigged out as a nobleman. Finally, to complete the strangeness of the scene, M. Nalot introduced Louis by the name of Bertin; and Louis allowed him to do so. He had not quite regained his presence of mind, and was still in doubt as to the course he should pursue. "Monsieur Bertin manages my factory with remarkable ability," remarked the manufacturer, "and I beg that you will treat him, not as my subordinate, but as my partner, for such I trust he will be before the end of the year."

"Are you a civil engineer, sir?" inquired the false marquis, drawing himself up.

"Not exactly," replied the real one, "I studied at the Polytechnic School."

"I can't congratulate you on that. America has no institution of the kind, but she has the best engineers in the world. I have just returned from that part."

"That can be seen. Plenty of ill-bred people are met there."

"Oh! oh! You don't bandy words, young man."

"I do what I please and give but little concern to your opinion," replied Louis, turning his back on the visitor.

M. Nalot, greatly annoyed by this passage of arms, was too well acquainted with the young engineer's proud disposition to interfere, so he took his guest by the arm and led him out on to the verandah, under pretext of showing him the garden, leaving Louis tête-à-tête with his wife. Gabrielle had taken refuge at the piano at the other end of the room. "My dear child, you ought to give us a little music," remarked Madame Nalot.

The young girl required no urging, but immediately attacked a very difficult and noisy composition which she executed with a sort of fury, as if to conceal her emotion. Her step-mother at once took advantage of the uproar to say to Louis: "It seems to me that my husband's future son-in-law doesn't please you. Perhaps he was not as polite as he should have been, but confess that his impoliteness was not the only cause of the anger you displayed. You would like to marry my step-daughter yourself?"

"Mademoiselle Nalot is at liberty to marry as she pleases."

"Do you think this gentleman will please her?"

"I really don't know, madame; and I am surprised you should ask me such a question."

"I should ask you several others which would astonish you even more if we were not here. Do you intend to return to Paris this evening?"

"I meant to remain here, but I may change my mind."

"Will you promise not to leave without seeing me? I must talk with you, and in your own interest."

"I am very grateful to you, madame, for the interest you seem to take in my welfare; but I do not know whether—"

"Don't refuse. Here comes my husband. We will resume this conversation presently, when we are alone."

Just then M. Nalot entered, smiling, and followed by the pretended marquis. "My dear friend," said the manufacturer to Louis, "the marquis regrets having wounded you, and wishes to be reconciled. Come and take a turn in the garden. The ladies will excuse you for a moment."

Louis, although somewhat surprised by this proposal, readily consented, for he wished to discover why this stranger who was sporting an assumed name should have stolen his in preference to any other. Scarcely had the two reached the steps than the pretended marquis began his apologies. "Excuse me, sir," he began, "for having expressed myself rather curtly. I have never had a very high opinion of government schools; but I now know your value. My friend Nalot has just told me what services you have rendered him. It seems probable that we shall often meet, since I am to marry his daughter, and you are to become his partner, so we ought to be on friendly terms, and I shall do my best to ensure such a desideratum."

"And Bertin will do the same," exclaimed M. Nalot. "Indeed, you ought to be the best of friends, for if he has no handle to his name, he is nevertheless a nobleman by his principles and conduct."

Everybody cannot trace his ancestry back to the time of the Crusades."

"I attach so little value to mine that I did not hesitate to leave the province where our name has been illustrious for centuries, to engage in business."

"You allude to Provence, I presume," said the young engineer, without appearing to attach any importance to the question.

"Yes, sir, Provence," replied the marquis, a little surprised to meet a young man who seemed so well informed respecting his family origin. "Do you belong to that part of the country?"

"I have spent most of my life in Paris," Louis replied, evasively; "it was there that I met, several years ago, a young man who bore your name."

"And you lost sight of him long ago, eh?"

"About three years ago."

"Yes, it was about that time that the young fellow decided to join me in America. He had squandered his fortune and led rather a fast life; still I gave him a very cordial welcome. In fact, I was anxious to reform him, and make him my heir, for I then had no idea of marrying; but unfortunately he died three months after his arrival."

"Ah! he died?"

"Yes, and the poor boy left me no other legacy than two family portraits which he had refused to part with, even in his direst poverty."

"Two family portraits!" exclaimed Louis.

"A strange idea that of your nephew's in taking them with him to America," said M. Nalot, laughing.

"Ah!" replied the false marquis, "the boy had been carefully taught by his father to revere the name he bore, and he could not part with the portraits of two men who had made that name illustrious in past centuries."

"Portraits of an admiral and a brigadier-general, were they not?" inquired Louis Bertin.

"How do you know that?" hastily inquired the pretended marquis.

"I saw the pictures at the young man's château in Provence, where I spent several days with him."

"Indeed! Why, then, we are old acquaintances almost, since you have been on intimate terms with my poor nephew Louis. You must have heard him speak of me?"

"Never, sir."

"Indeed! Well the fact is, he was so terribly proud that he did not like to admit that he had an uncle who was engaged in business. He thought I had degraded myself."

"Well, he certainly proved that he was not so proud as he joined you in America."

"Oh! he was then at the end of his tether. Hunger drives the wolf out of the woods."

"It's strange!" exclaimed Louis, as if a thought had suddenly struck him. "But I remember now, that a few days before our separation, and on the eve of my departure for England, where I remained several years, Louis de Mérindol told me that all his family papers and the portraits of his great-uncles had been stolen from him."

"I don't understand what could have been his object in inventing such a story, for it was a pure fabrication, I assure you. I can easily prove the truth of what I say if you will call on me at the hotel where I am temporarily stopping. I have the portraits there."

"I should be delighted to admire them."

"Very well, then, Monsieur Nalot must bring you to see me some day. We shall be able to talk about your friend, my unfortunate nephew, whose loss I sincerely regret."

This was too much, and Mérindol, exasperated by such impudence, was about to unmask the impostor and tell him that he lied, when a servant hurriedly approached the verandah and exclaimed: "A gentleman who has just arrived from Paris wishes to see Monsieur Bertin."

Louis, turned round, surprised and somewhat annoyed at being diverted from his purpose. "Did this gentleman give his name?" he asked.

"No, sir; but his business seems to be urgent. He is in a cab near the pavilion, and he insisted strongly upon seeing Monsieur Bertin."

"Go and see who it is, my dear fellow," exclaimed M. Nalot, "and return to us when you have got rid of your visitor. Now that the ice between you and the marquis is broken, we shall spend a delightful evening, I am sure."

Mérindol hesitated for a instant, but concluding that he would soon find a better opportunity to reveal himself in his true character, he decided to absent himself for a few moments. Something told him that a man who came to St. Ouen expressly to see him at nine o'clock in the evening must have something important to communicate. He even suspected that his visitor was Mongeorge.

On reaching the road he perceived a cab, near which a tall man, wearing a very broad-brimmed felt hat, was walking impatiently up and down. Louis went forward, thinking there must be some mistake, when the owner of the strange looking hat bounded towards him and joyfully exclaimed: "Ah! thank heaven, I have found you at last."

"Piganiou!" rejoined Mérindol. "What, you have made such a journey at your age and without warning me of your coming! Why didn't you write to me?"

"Because I knew you would object to my leaving the mill, so I thought it best not to inform you beforehand."

"In any case I am very glad to see you. But tell me, has any misfortune befallen you or yours?"

"No, Monsieur Louis, my wife and children are quite well. They wanted to keep me at home, but I wouldn't listen to them.

Just think of it, Monsieur Louis ; it is now nearly four years since I last saw you—four years come next November. Do you remember your last visit to the château ?”

“Yes, I recollect what occurred then, and really it is Providence that has sent you here to-night. Come, come with me.” And Mérindol dragged Piganiou into M. Nalot’s grounds almost perforce.

The worthy man, although surprised by this reception, offered no resistance. Louis bade him be silent and walk as quietly as possible, and then led him along a dark walk, to within some ten yards of the villa. Through the open windows they could distinctly see all that was going on in the brilliantly lighted drawing-room. “Look at the man who stands facing us,” whispered Mérindol. “Do you know him ?”

Piganiou hesitated but an instant, and then murmured : “By the Blessed Virgin, it is the convict who stole your portraits and papers ! It is Ricœun !”

“I was sure of it, but without your help, I could do nothing against the scoundrel. Let us go now. The time for action has not yet arrived, but it may come to-morrow, or perhaps even to-night.”

VI.

MÉRINDOL was not a little excited by this unexpected adventure. Entering the pavilion he conducted Piganiou to a room overlooking the road, for he did not wish any light to be seen from the garden of the villa. He wanted to consult the old retainer of his family, and cared but little what M. or Madame Nalot thought about his abrupt departure. A man willing to marry his daughter to an escaped convict must be a villain of the deepest dye, and his wife, who favoured the plan, could be no better than he was. Mérindol concluded to let them think that he had returned to Paris ; besides, he hoped that their attention would be too much engrossed by other matters that evening for them to trouble themselves any further about him. There was but one person who had any right to complain of his absence—poor Gabrielle, who was left a defenceless prey to the unwelcome attentions of a villainous suitor, and the machinations of an unprincipled father and step-mother. Mérindol did not wish to abandon her though he now felt less inclined to marry her, his recent discoveries had made him reflect.

A long conversation now ensued between Louis and Piganiou. The young marquis related what had occurred that evening, and the old miller strongly advised him to have Ricœur arrested. Louis was quite willing to do so, but for Gabrielle's sake he felt disposed to spare Nalot, who, so he rightly or wrongly conjectured, must have been the escaped convict's accomplice in various dark deeds. "Yes," said Mérindol, "I can at least spare Mademoiselle Gabrielle the disgrace of seeing her father sent to the galleys. I can tell her what is going on."

"So that she may warn these brigands !" rejoined Piganiou.
" You certainly don't think of doing that ? "

" I not only think of it, but I shall do it this very night, and I shall merely denounce Ricœur to the police when Nalot has had time to make his escape, if he has any serious cause for uneasiness, as I fear he has. I shall know for certain, however, when I have seen this unfortunate girl, for she told me that she would be in the garden at two o'clock to-night."

" And you will met her there ? " asked Piganiou.

" Yes, certainly. You can return to Paris if you prefer."

" Oh, no, I sha'n't leave you, Monsieur Louis."

" But I don't need you here, my good friend. On the contrary, you will rather be in my way."

" You may put me in a corner, and I will not stir from it ; but don't tell me to leave you, especially when you are about to run into danger, for I shall do nothing of the kind."

" What danger ? "

" Danger of being killed. How do you know that Ricœur did not recognize you ? He saw you often when you were a child. You have changed a great deal since then, it is true ; but he is sharp, terribly sharp, and he will take steps to suppress you."

" No doubt ; but not to-night. I have time to take my precautions ; and I assure you that I will be ready for him."

" Take care, Monsieur Louis, don't be over sure."

" Listen to me. You can remain ; but as I want the inmates of the villa to think I am alone, you must re-enter your cab, drive a short distance, then alight, pay the driver in advance for all the night, and tell him to wait for you. If he makes any objection, promise him twenty francs gratuity and he will consent, never fear. A sure means of returning to Paris must be at our disposal."

" Am I to come back here after doing that ? "

" Yes ; tap three times softly on the door, and I will admit you. If you ring, the servants will hear you, and I am anxious to prevent that. After your return you can go to sleep if you like. Shortly before two o'clock I will take a turn in the garden. Oh, the interview won't last long, and as soon as it is ended we will start for Paris together."

" Your plan suits me very well, Monsieur Louis—that is, if you will promise to call me in case you need me."

" Of course I will. So now go and make your arrangements with the driver and return as quickly as possible."

Piganiou needed no urging ; and Mérindol, after extinguishing the light, sat down, by the window to wait for him. In about twenty minutes the miller returned. The driver won over by his fare's generosity, was waiting on the road, at some little distance from the house, and could be relied upon. Mérindol now reflected that Mademoiselle Nalot might not keep the appointment she had made if she did not see him before she left the drawing-room ; but on the other hand he was extremely anxious to avoid another meeting that evening with the pretended marquis ; so fearing that M. Nalot might send to ascertain what had become of him, he rang for one of his employer's servants—the pavilion was connected with the villa by an electric bell—and bade the man tell his master that having been taken with a violent headache he wished to be excused and was going to bed. He next tried to devise some way to let Gabrielle know that his pretended illness was only a pretext for not returning to the villa, and finally decided upon the following plan : Half an hour afterwards he went softly into the garden, and stealthily approached an open window at the end of the drawing-room—the same window to which he had previously conducted Piganiou. Stationing himself in the shadow of a tree so that he could see without being seen, he noticed that M. and Madame

Nalot and the pretended marquis were seated with their backs to the garden, listening to a piece of music which Gabrielle, who faced the window, was playing. Mérindol waited until the piece was concluded ; and then, just as the young girl was rising from the instrument, he suddenly stepped out into the light streaming from the window. Gabrielle saw him, but had sufficient self-control not to betray her surprise ; so he held up two fingers as much as to say : “ I will come at two o'clock ; ” and by a slight inclination of the head she let him see that she understood him.

Louis then rejoined Piganiou, who was almost asleep. “ Lie down on my bed and rest,” said Mérindol. “ You are tired out.”

The old man tried to protest ; but he was finally obliged to confess that he could not keep awake any longer, and consented to lie down with his clothes on, however not until Mérindol had promised to wake him up when the eventful moment arrived. Allowing Piganiou to snore on undisturbed, Louis went to the window overlooking the garden, and soon the heavy rumble of carriage wheels apprised him that the pretended marquis was on his way back to Paris. A quarter of an hour afterwards the lights in the drawing-room were extinguished and the shutters closed.

Two hours remained before the time fixed for the interview with Gabrielle, and Mérindol fell into a long reverie. His had been a delightful dream ; but the awakening had come suddenly, and the future which had been tinged with such roseate tints for a few months past, was again obscured by dark and threatening clouds. What was the situation ? A hopeless love, a lost position, three years of arduous toil, ending in bitter disappointment. “ I really believe it would have been better for me to have lived like an owl in my old ruined dungeon,” he murmured. “ I should have died of starvation, perhaps, but I should, at least, have escaped contact with the runaway convicts I now encounter at each step. I have a great mind to go back to Provence, and turn miller like Piganiou.”

These reflections, and others of a similar nature, engrossed his mind until about a quarter of two o'clock. Piganiou was still sleeping so peacefully that Mérindol went out alone, contenting himself with leaving the door open so that he might call his faithful friend, if necessary. The young fellow proceeded towards the villa and stationed himself under a spreading sycamore, which would serve to conceal him in case an alarm was given. Not a light was visible anywhere in the house ; but the night was sufficiently clear to enable one to distinguish objects some little distance off. Mérindol could distinctly see the front of the villa, which was covered with ivy and clematis like an English cottage. In some places, however, the growth was not sufficiently dense to conceal the white wall, and against one of these bare patches there stood out a black line which Mérindol had never before noticed.

On looking at it more attentively he perceived that it extended from the ground to a window on the second floor, which he fancied

was partially open. As all this seemed very strange to him. He softly approached the wall ; but he was utterly unprepared for the discovery which he made on stretching out his hand.

The black line was a strong, knotted rope, like those used by plumbers, firemen, and sometimes also by thieves. Had Gabrielle fastened it there with the intention of using it, to leave the house ? Mérindol could hardly believe that she was capable of performing such a gymnastic feat, and asked himself a little anxiously if some one had not surreptitiously entered the villa.

Just then a sharp cry broke upon the stillness of the night. It seemed to come from the second floor of the house, and the young engineer involuntarily looked up to see if the person who had shrieked was not visible at the window. But he saw only the creepers swaying in the early breeze, and all the inmates of the villa were probably sound asleep, for the silence which had been momentarily disturbed now seemed more profound than ever. Still the cry re-echoed dismally in Mérindol's heart. It was a woman's cry, or at least so it had seemed to him, and he anxiously asked himself if some one had not discovered Mademoiselle Nalot stealthily descending to the garden, and if the girl had not fainted in terror after uttering that wild cry. "She must think that I am here," thought Mérindol. "Who knows but she may have uttered that cry to summon me to her aid ?"

The supposition was absurd ; but lovers do not pride themselves on logic, and Louis was not in a condition to reason calmly, for this knotted rope, dangling from the window, had alarmed him greatly. He was still indulging in all sorts of surmises when a slight stir made him raise his head. To his infinite surprise he saw a man lean out of the window, seize hold of the rope, and begin to descend slowly and methodically like a person accustomed to this kind of exercise.

Mérindol rapidly drew a revolver from his pocket and cocked it, then, emerging from his hiding-place, he so stationed himself as to be able to attack the man in the rear. The fellow was evidently a burglar. "If you move or cry out, you are a dead man !" exclaimed Louis with his weapon near the stranger's ear, and at the same time by twisting a scarf the fellow wore he almost choked him. This scarf concealed the lower half of the man's face, and a soft felt hat was, moreover, pulled down over his eyes in such a way that only the end of his nose was visible. Thus Mérindol was unable to say whom he had captured ; but this was not the moment for surmises, action was needful of all things. "March !" said Louis to his prisoner, emphasizing the injunction with a vigorous kick ; "march, or I will break your head."

The scoundrel replied by a smothered groan and obeyed. Mérindol, without relaxing his hold or lowering his revolver, dragged him to the pavilion door, which he had taken the precaution to leave open. To close this door, he had momentarily to release his prisoner and for fear of an attempt at escape he gave him a

vigorous push which stretched him on the floor. He then at once slipped the bolt, and called Piganiou in Provençal dialect. The miller sprung out of bed, and hastening to the spot with a lighted candle, exclaimed : "What is the matter ?"

"I have just caught a thief in the act," replied Mérindol. And revolver in hand, he walked straight up to the man, who having scrambled to his feet was manoeuvring to reach the door. "Take his hat off," cried Mérindol to Piganiou, who sprang forward and executed the order with such dexterity that the prisoner's head was bare before he could make any resistance. Prevented from concealing his face, he uttered a cry of rage, and dipped his hand into his pocket, as if to draw a knife.

"Keep still or I will send a bullet through you," said Mérindol, taking a step forward, and as he did so he recognized Corraille, the overseer. "What!" he exclaimed, "so you are the rascal who climbs into the villa at night to rob your employer?"

"It's false," growled the wretch. "I have stolen nothing!" He was livid, his teeth chattered, and he looked wildly around him like a wild beast caught in a trap.

"We will soon see about that," replied Mérindol. "Set down your candle, Piganiou; and take off your leather belt and fasten this rascal's hands behind his back with it."

"Don't come near me," said Corraille, in a husky voice.

"No resistance, or I will kill you like a dog," rejoined Mérindol. "It is the last time I shall warn you."

"Come, give me your paws," said the miller, whereupon Corraille allowed himself to be bound without making any resistance. He was evidently much frightened, and Mérindol was surprised that the mere sight of a revolver should have such an effect upon a man who looked like a determined bandit.

"Now we will have an explanation," said Louis, "though it is hardly necessary, as you must know what awaits you."

"You are not going to murder me, I hope."

"Ah! we do not care to soil our hands by touching you. It is the gendarmes that you will have to deal with."

"You certainly won't have me arrested?" said the scoundrel trembling.

"You cannot be fool enough to suppose that I shall set you at liberty. Monsieur Nalot would never forgive me if I did."

"Nalot!" repeated Corraille, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't care a fig for Nalot."

"We will see if you talk in the same strain when you are in his presence!"

"Yes, I shall," retorted the overseer.

"Then I will try the experiment to-morrow morning, but in the meantime, pray tell me why you entered Monsieur Nalot's house by the window, at two o'clock in the morning?"

"In the first place, I did not enter the house by the window. I merely used the rope to get out. I had been in the kitchen

talking with the servants and fell asleep there. They thought it would be a good joke not to wake me, and when I opened my eyes I found that they had all gone upstairs and that I was locked in the house. Being unable to get out by the door and having a bit of rope about me I went upstairs myself so as to get out by one of the windows."

"That's nonsense ! You concealed yourself somewhere in the villa, and when everybody was asleep you left your hiding-place to steal the plate or Madame Nalot's diamonds."

"I am not such a fool as to take them. You can search me, if you like. You will find nothing in my hands, or in my pockets."

"We will see about that presently. Perhaps you tried to break open a cupboard or secretary, but the lock resisted your efforts, and while you were at work, you were surprised by some one who gave the shriek I heard."

"The shriek !" repeated Corraille, turning still paler ; "you are mistaken. There was no shriek."

"You lie ! I heard a cry of pain—a woman's cry." Corraille started, and hung his head. "It was the cry of a woman, who detected you in the act, and whom you perhaps killed," added Louis.

"That's false ! You can see that there is no blood on me. It happened like this. I met the cook on the stairs, and as I had no light she took me for a thief and gave a shriek, but I whispered my name, and as she knew why I was still in the house she didn't say anything more."

"But, if the cook saw you, you could have had the door opened, so why did you leave the house by the window ?"

"Because I was afraid that her cry might have woke up the master or the missus, and I didn't want to be caught in the house. So, having my rope all ready—"

"Then you persist in declaring that you have stolen nothing ?"

"I have given you permission to search me. You will merely find in my pockets my tobacco-box, my pipe, and some papers for a light."

"Papers !" repeated Mérindol, hastily. He had so far quite forgotten the story of the Count de Porcien's will ; but he now remembered that the rascal who had possession of this will was at his mercy. "There are papers which are even more valuable than diamonds," he retorted, looking searchingly at Corraille, "a will for instance."

"I don't understand what you mean," stammered Corraille.

"Do you remember the Count de Porcien," asked Mérindol, "at whose château you worked as a locksmith thirteen years ago ?"

"I'm not a locksmith, and I was never employed at any château."

"But you certainly stole something there—a will which you intended to sell. Come don't deny it, I know everything."

"Ah, you know everything," said the rascal, suddenly changing his tone. "Who told you, pray ?"

"It was Monsieur Nalot."

"The scoundrel! I suspected as much. Well, as he has denounced me, I may as well speak out. Yes, there was a will not stolen but *found*, years ago in the Ardennes, and I am the person who found it. That rascal Nalot stole it from me—yes *stole* it. I should have returned it to the heiress, but Nalot took it from me to sell it to the man who marries her—to you, if she accepts you. So now you understand why he wished to employ you at his Paris establishment."

Mérindol could not doubt the accuracy of the charge. He had previously suspected that Corraille was only his employer's tool, and everything went to shew that M. Nalot was simply a scoundrel. This thought filled Louis with grief and consternation, for M. Nalot was Gabrielle's father. But Corraille was certainly no better than his master, and he was at least his accomplice. A light suddenly flashed upon Mérindol's mind. He now understood why Corraille had scaled the wall of the villa. "He went there to recover the will," Louis said to himself. "The question is to find out if he succeeded." And turning to Piganiou the young engineer added aloud: "Search that man."

"Do not touch me," cried Corraille in a husky voice.

"Ah, so you refuse to be searched, now?" replied Mérindol. "A few minutes ago, you thought I should pay no attention to any papers found upon you. You did not imagine I knew all about the will which you stole back from Nalot a little while ago. Admit that that was your object in breaking into your employer's house at two o'clock in the morning?"

"Well, yes, it was; but if you denounce me, you will be sorry for it."

"Come search him, Piganiou," said Mérindol, shrugging his shoulders scornfully.

Piganiou complied, and speedily extracted from Corraille's coat pocket a paper, yellow with time. The prisoner offered no resistance.

Mérindol took up the candle which had been set on the stairs, glanced at the paper and saw that it was indeed the will. Cécile's inheritance was recovered. "And so," said Louis, "I was right, it seems. You had stolen the will. What did you mean to do with it?"

"I intended to sell it to the Count de Porcien," replied Corraille with unblushing effrontery. "I have been negotiating with him for three months past, for I never placed much reliance in old Nalot's plans, and Porcien was willing to pay me a handsome sum. Unfortunately, however, I hadn't got the document, and was only able to put my hand on it to-night. If I had known I was working for you, I shouldn't have taken so much trouble."

"You have spoken about me to the Count de Porcien, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, he made some inquiries of me respecting Nalot and the people about him, and I answered them. Porcien took an interest in the matter as he knew that Nalot could ruin him, if he

chose. However, it's I who am ruined as it happens, for you have secured the will ; but I shall make the best of it, and as you will gain nothing by detaining me, I hope that you will release me at once."

"Release you ! I am going to hand you over to the gendarmes."

"They are all asleep at this hour," muttered Corraille.

"It will be easy to wake them up. We have a vehicle waiting, and we will take you straight to St. Denis."

"You certainly won't do that ! Hand me over to Nalot, if you like ; but don't have me arrested—or if you do the police will learn a lot of nasty things about Nalot, and that won't be very pleasant for you, as you have been in his employ for a year."

"What has Monsieur Nalot done, then ?" inquired Mérindol, secretly alarmed by this unexpected threat.

"Oh, nothing of consequence. He only practises usury, and acts as receiver to all the thieves in Paris. If you didn't guess that when you inspected his establishment, you can't be very sharp." Mérindol turned pale. Gabrielle was evidently the daughter of a dishonest man. "Nor is that all," continued Corraille, complacently noting the effect of his revelations, "the authorities may worry me a bit, but I shall get off easily enough, while Nalot will have twenty years' hard labour at the least. He had robbed and coined counterfeit money, and besides he's the convicts' banker, the man the police have 'wanted' for fifteen years or more. You don't seem to believe me, but it's true. You imagine that Nalot's an honest man, simply because his name is down in the Directory. Perhaps you also take Madame Nalot for a virtuous woman—a good-for-nothing creature who was obliged to fly from an English colony, where she was suspected of having poisoned her husband. She isn't Nalot's real wife ; he wouldn't marry her, for she would have put arsenic in his soup to get hold of his money. As for his daughter—"

"Silence, you scoundrel ! I forbid any mention of Mademoiselle Nalot's name."

"Oh, I know nothing bad against the girl herself, but I would advise you to ask Nalot to show you a certificate of her birth. You will find that she's a natural child. It isn't her fault, of course, and if Nalot is willing to dower her handsomely, the man who marries her won't do so bad."

"Silence !" cried Mérindol once more.

"Oh, I'm not anxious to give you any further information ; but you will do as well to profit by that already furnished. Yes ; Nalot is the convicts' banker ; and although he has so far managed to escape detection, he will end his days at the galley, all the same, and I'll send him there."

"What ! you intend to denounce your employer ?"

"I should be a great fool not to do so. You mean to hand me over to the gendarmes, you say. I can't prevent it, as I'm in your power, but I advise you to look out for yourself, for the police will

certainly make a raid on the factory and the place in the Rue Mondétour. You will be arrested just like every one else ; you will go to the dépôt, and the Count de Porcien's heiress will go to St. Lazare."

Mérindol turned pale. He realised that Corraille was right. If the rascal denounced M. Nalot, both Cécile and the young engineer would be involved in a terrible scandal. No doubt they would be able to justify themselves, but odium always clings in some degree or other to persons arrested on suspicion. Corraille saw that his last blow had told, so he continued : " Of course I shall only do this in self-defence, as I know very well that you were ignorant of the real facts of the case ; I will even be silent, if you wish it. You have merely to let me go, and I assure you that the police will learn nothing from me."

His meaning was clear. He offered to sell his silence, and much as Mérindol disliked bargaining with such a rascal, he felt that it was probably the wisest course to pursue. After all, Corraille had only stolen a will—a will that Mérindol had succeeded in wresting from him ; so would it not be as well to send the scoundrel off to be hanged elsewhere ? " What shall you do if I set you free ? " inquired Louis.

" I shall leave France never to return again. It won't be a safe place for me now."

" Well, answer one more question. It shall be the last. Do you know the man whom your employer entertained this evening ? "

" The man who is to marry Mademoiselle Gabrielle ? No, I never laid eyes on him before, but I am sure that he hasn't been long out of prison. All Nalot's acquaintances are of that stamp."

Mérindol, after reflecting a moment, turned to Piganiou and said, " Unbind him and let him go ; " and the miller, although still completely mystified, did as he was bid. Corraille promptly availed himself of the permission to decamp, and ten minutes later, Mérindol and Piganiou entered the cab which was waiting, and started for Paris together.

VII.

ON the second morning following the night on which Mérindol had left St. Ouen for good, Piganiou was breakfasting with his young master in a private room at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of the Central Markets of Paris. They had spent part of the previous day together, but Mérindol had found time to see both Cécile and Mongeorge separately ; and without telling them what had occurred, he had requested them to hold themselves in readiness to join him whenever he sent for them. Cécile, for whom he waited outside the establishment in the Rue Mondétour, had been only too glad to return home, as she did not at all care to remain in M. Nalot's employ. Mongeorge, warned that his preserver had a surprise in store for him, had promised not to stir from the hotel in the Rue Tronchet, so that Mérindol, who had quartered himself on Piganiou, felt sure of seeing both of them appear at the first summons.

Louis had greatly suffered, for Corraille's revelations had destroyed his fondest hopes. His only course now was to forget Gabrielle Nalot, the innocent child of an infamous father ; and he had resolved to leave Paris forever, and seek some quiet spot where he could live and die in peace. Before disappearing, however, he wished to make two people happy. Piganiou, who did not fully understand the situation, had a much simpler plan. He meant to try and persuade Mérindol to return to Provence, and reside either at the mill or in the old manor house. He had profited by the opportunity afforded by their tête-à-tête breakfast to make some suggestions of this kind ; but Mérindol had turned a deaf ear to his talk, and the meal came to an end without any important question being decided.

“ What course do you advise as regards Ricœur ? ” asked Mérindol, suddenly. “ Don't you think I had better not trouble myself about him ? I am disgusted with all these knaves, but what good will it do to unmask them ? I shall never see them again, as I have made up my mind to leave France for good. What difference does it make if this scoundrel Ricœur has assumed a name which I shall never bear again ? ”

“ He will dishonour it,” said Piganiou ; “ he will commit some new crime, and then—”

“ Then, my friend, everyone who knows me will rise up to defend me and confound the impostor. I have lived long enough in Paris and am sufficiently well known for the fraud to be speedily detected. I even doubt if he will dare to continue sporting my name and title

which he assumed, I fancy, merely to deceive Monsieur Nalot. Mademoiselle Nalot knows the truth by this time, for I wrote to her yesterday morning. She will inform her father, and Ricœur will soon disappear."

Piganiou was about to make some fresh objection, but just then a waiter opened the door and ushered Mongeorge into the room. "Your letter was just handed to me," said the new-comer, gazing in astonishment at the old miller, who on his side evinced some surprise; "and when I learned that you were waiting for me here, I made as much haste as possible, for I fancied you wished to see me respecting the terrible catastrophe which has occurred at Monsieur Nalot's villa."

"What catastrophe?" inquired Mérindol.

"What! haven't you seen the papers this morning?" exclaimed Mongeorge, who seemed to be greatly excited.

"I must confess that I have paid no attention to the papers for a couple of days past, my dear Mongeorge."

"Mongeorge! is your name Mongeorge, sir?" cried Piganiou, springing to his feet.

"This is a good time to remind you both that you met each other some three years ago," said Mérindol.

The old miller now cordially offered his hand to the ex-notary, and quite an affecting scene ensued. Mongeorge had to recount afresh the various incidents of his sojourn in Italy, and Piganiou congratulated him on the success of his efforts. "However," he added, "it is dangerous for a man to return to France when he has escaped from Toulon. Judges have excellent memories, and the gendarmes also; besides, there is the danger of meeting old and disreputable acquaintances, like that scoundrel who tried to murder you, for instance."

"Ricœur!" replied Mongeorge.

"Yes; he is in Paris," replied Mérindol. "I have seen him, and so has Piganiou. And guess what he has done! You, perhaps, recollect that he stole my papers and portraits on the same night that he attempted to murder you? Well, with them to support his statements, he now calls himself the Marquis de Mérindol, and was positively introduced to me under my own name."

"But you certainly did not tolerate such an outrage? You cast his past in his teeth, of course?" exclaimed Mongeorge.

"I said nothing—for several reasons—one of which was that you were in Paris. I did not care to initiate an investigation which would bring your escape to mind again."

"And for my sake you would allow this scoundrel to escape? But no, it shall not be. I know what I must do—"

"You certainly cannot think of denouncing him yourself, for such a step would be your ruin."

"What of that? I shall have done my duty."

Mérindol started. Again he realised that a truly noble, generous heart beat in the breast of this unfortunate man who had worn a

convict's blouse during so many years. "My dear Mongeorge," he said, affectionately, "I will tell you in a few moments why you must not think of sacrificing yourself in such a manner. But you spoke of a catastrophe. What has happened at St. Ouen, then? A robbery has been committed, perhaps, and a missing employé has been accused of it?"

"Oh! it is far worse than that! Mademoiselle Nalot has been murdered."

"Murdered!" cried Mérindol, wildly.

"Yes, on the night before last. The papers state that yesterday morning the servants of Monsieur Nalot, a wealthy manufacturer, residing at St. Ouen, found their employer's daughter dead at the foot of the stairs. She had been strangled, for her throat still bore the marks of the murderer's fingers."

"It was Corraille!" exclaimed Mérindol.

"Ah, the scoundrel!" muttered Piganou. "That is why he was in such a hurry to get away, and so afraid that we might hand him over to the gendarmes. I told you, Monsieur Louis, that we ought not to let him go."

"Well, the papers say that the police are on the murderer's track," interrupted Mongeorge. "His object in entering the house was evidently robbery, for a secretary had been broken open, and it is supposed that he was seen by the unfortunate young girl just as he was about to make his escape, and that he killed her to prevent her from alarming the other members of the household. Monsieur Nalot, it appears, lost no time in entering a complaint; and he seems to think that the murderer was a stranger. He clearly states that he does not suspect any of the members of his household or any of his employés."

"The scoundrel lies!" muttered Mérindol. "He knows very well that Corraille was the murderer, for he must have discovered that the will is missing, and Corraille is the only person who could have had any interest in securing it."

"The will!" said Mongeorge, failing to understand.

"Yes, the will of the Count de Porcien, the real will, which he signed and dated, while he only gave the rough draft to you. The villain who killed Mademoiselle Nalot found it in a desk which he was repairing at the count's chateau, where he was employed for a few days. He kept it in the hope of turning it to advantage afterwards. He wanted to marry Cécile. Monsieur Nalot was his accomplice, and the will was in his possession. Corraille entered the villa to steal it in order to sell it to the present Count de Porcien, who would have destroyed it, undoubtedly—and Corraille evidently killed Mademoiselle Nalot, who must have surprised him in the house."

"How terrible!" murmured Mongeorge. "But if this man Corraille tried to marry Cécile, as you tell me, he must know where she is."

"It was through him that she obtained a situation in Monsieur

Nalot's establishment. For she is found and I have seen her. But don't interrupt me. Nalot wanted to marry her to any subordinate who would consent to share the Count de Porcien's legacy with him. He thought me capable of consenting to such an infamous bargain, and so he sent me to his Paris house in order to acquaint me with the poor girl. I was fortunate enough to gain her confidence, and she told me her story. Need I say that she spoke of you, and that I told her you were in Paris, and that you had been trying to find her for years."

"Then she knows that I escaped from the galley?" said Mongeorge who was greatly moved.

"Yes, and she assured me, with tears in her eyes, that she longed to have an opportunity of thanking the generous friend who had suffered so much for her sake."

"So she consents to see me?"

"I am expecting her every minute, and indeed here she comes, now," said Mérindol, hearing the sound of approaching footsteps in the passage outside.

The next moment the door opened and Cécile, escorted by a waiter, appeared before them. Piganiou, who had not previously seen her, was quite dazzled by her beauty, and looked at Louis as if to ask him why this lovely young woman had come there.

In the meanwhile, Mongeorge sank back on his chair, overcome with emotion. Mérindol took Cécile by the hand, and when the waiter had gone, he led her to the man who had devoted his life and honour to her. "Embrace her," he said to Mongeorge; and Cécile, giving a cry of joy, threw her arms around her old friend's neck. "I have united you. My task is accomplished," added Louis de Mérindol, with an emotion he did not attempt to conceal.

Cécile sobbed convulsively, and Mongeorge was unable to utter a word; delight all but stifled him. Piganiou, quite disconcerted at first, now began to understand the situation.

"We shall not be separated again. You will promise me that, will you not?" said Cécile at last.

"Alas!" murmured Mongeorge, "I shall be obliged to spend my life in exile."

"I know it, and I will gladly accompany you wherever you may go."

"What! you would consent to do that? No, I cannot allow such a sacrifice on your part."

"It will be no sacrifice. What is there to keep me in Paris? Are you not my only friend?"

"You have not yet heard that you are rich, mademoiselle?" said Mérindol.

"Rich! why I have not even a livelihood now. Even if I had desired to remain at Monsieur Nalot's, I could not do so, for when I went to the Rue Mondétour this morning to give notice that I should not return again, I found a crowd assembled at the gate and

heard several persons say that Monsieur Nalot had absconded, and that several of his employés had carried off all they could during the night—”

“Ah, I understand !” interrupted Mérindol. “Nalot realized that he would be a ruined man if any attempt was made to investigate his affairs. The detectives summoned to his villa at St. Ouen might pay a visit to the Rue Mondétour, and he did not deem it advisable to wait for that. Corraille, by murdering Mademoiselle Gabrielle, compelled Nalot to disappear ; and to-morrow, people will discover that this prominent manufacturer was simply the convicts’ banker.”

“The convicts’ banker !” exclaimed Mongeorge.

“Yes, my friend, the provision dealer whom you sought in vain in the Popincourt district, has been conducting an entirely different business, under an entirely different name. He has been practising usury with the help of a scamp named Rognas, who pretended to deal in leeches, in the Rue de la Grande-Truanderie.”

“I just heard that Rognas had also absconded,” said Cécile.

“Like all the members of the band, of course. Ah ! in a few hours, all Paris will know the story of the man by whom I was employed, and whom you, mademoiselle, also served. Don’t you think, therefore, that the very best thing we can now do, is to leave France, and at once ?”

“Now that I have found Monsieur Mongeorge,” said Cécile, “I know that I am going to Italy.”

“We will all go there,” said Mérindol, “that is excepting Piganou who can’t leave his family. But he will accompany us as far as Marseilles. As for myself I will not remain a day longer in this accursed city.”

“You, mademoiselle,” continued Louis, turning to Cécile, “must return here when the excitement caused by Nalot’s hasty flight has abated, for you will have to assert your claims to the late Count de Porcien’s property. Here is his will, which makes you his sole legatee.”

“What ! you have found it ?” exclaimed Cécile.

“I took it by force from the scoundrel who had stolen it. You are rich, now, mademoiselle. You will have to bring an action, of course, to recover the property ; but you will win the suit unquestionably.”

“But to gain it I shall be obliged to explain how this will came into my possession, thirteen years after my benefactor’s death, reveal all I owe to you—inform the authorities that you were the superintendent of Monsieur Nalot’s factory, and that I, myself, was employed at the establishment in the Rue Mondétour, the den of a band of thieves !”

“You will have no difficulty in proving that you were ignorant of what was really going on there, and I shall be able to vindicate my own character, if I am suspected of having abetted that rascal Nalot.”

"Do you think, sir, that wealth will compensate me for the sacrifice of my peace of mind?" inquired Cécile, looking Mérindol full in the face. "I can live happily and peacefully with those I love. Do you think I should be the gainer by the change?"

"What! you would leave the scamp who defrauded you in undisputed possession of a fortune that does not belong to him?"

"No matter, I don't know him and don't wish to know him."

"Ah! if you did, you would speak differently; believe me, mademoiselle, he deserves punishment. He is a confirmed gambler, and leads a life of dissipation. Moreover, he knows that this will is in existence, and that he has no right to his cousin's property. Corraille offered to sell him the will, and this would certainly have been effected, had not Providence placed Corraille in my power. I wrested the stolen document from him, mademoiselle, and I now hand it to you, in order that you may be able to assert your rights in a court of law."

Cécile took the paper and tore it in pieces without even unfolding it.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Mongeorge.

"You can see for yourself, my friend," Cécile replied. "I prefer to remain poor, for now I am sure that you will allow me to accompany you to Italy, and I am also sure that no one will marry me for my fortune."

"Dash it!" cried Piganou, "there's spirit for you."

Mongeorge and Mérindol exchanged glances. "When shall we start?" inquired the young engineer.

"This evening, if you like" replied Mongeorge.

"And I am to accompany you, am I not?" asked Cécile.

"And so am I," chimed in Piganou. "You can certainly stop for a few days at my mill at Reyran. I will afterwards take you as far as Nice, and you can go along the Riviera to Genoa."

"Why not?" said Mérindol. "Our friend Mongeorge has become Signor Giuseppe Casaldi, a resident of Ancona, and no one in our province knows him. People will take mademoiselle for his wife."

"For his daughter," interrupted Cécile.

"Yes, that will seem more probable," muttered Mongeorge.

"There is one slight change I should like to propose, however," continued Mérindol. "Instead of deferring our departure until this evening, why can't we start at once? There must be a day train for Marseilles or Lyons. It is best not to lose a minute. What do you say?"

"I am ready," said Cécile.

"My luggage won't be an impediment. I merely brought a valise," remarked Piganou..

"I settled my bill at the hotel this morning," observed Mongeorge in his turn, "and I have all my money about me."

"And I have, in my pocket, enough to defray the expenses of

all of us," exclaimed Mérindol. "Let us be off, my friends. I don't care to remain any longer in this Paris, where a scoundrel can creep into an honest man's skin by assuming his name. If Ricœur is ever convicted under mine, I will return and expose him."

* * * * *

Twenty years have elapsed, and Paris has long since forgotten the celebrated trial which engrossed its attention for a month, and which the papers styled "The affair of the Rue Mondétour." Seventeen persons appeared before the Assize Court of the Seine, and among them Monsieur Nalot, who was proved to be the leader of a band of thieves and receivers of stolen goods. The St. Ouen crime only figured incidentally in the case, Corraillé having succeeded in escaping to England, and thence to America. The scoundrel was never captured, so that Gabrielle's death remained unavenged, unless her murderer was hanged elsewhere for other crimes. A long and careful investigation revealed, however, all the knavery of the man whose daughter she had been, unfortunately for herself. Nalot, denounced by a letter from Corraillé, who had hoped that Louis Bertin would be compromised in the affair, made no confessions, but his guilt was fully proved, and he was sentenced to fifteen years' hard labour; he ended his days in New Caledonia, where his cashier, Séranon, is living still. Ricœur, warned in time, had fled, and thus escaped the ruin which overtook his prospective father-in-law. These two scoundrels had no suspicions of each other's real character, however. Each had tried to deceive the other. Ricœur had merely presented himself as the Marquis de Mérindol to dazzle a man whom he supposed to be a wealthy capitalist; so he speedily renounced the title, and decamped, after burning the portraits which he had stolen from the old château. He returned to California, where he was eventually killed in a gambling-den which he opened at San Francisco. The self-styled Madame Nalot was not troubled by the authorities. She took to a dissolute life, more in accordance with her tastes than the quiet existence she had led at St. Owen, and, some ten years afterwards, she perished miserably.

On the other hand Providence fittingly rewarded the deserving Mongorge, who, after becoming the head of a large banking-house, died about a year ago, happy and honoured. No one in Italy was aware that this worthy man had ever been a convicted criminal; and even if the fact had been known, public opinion would still have upheld him, for he had amply atoned for his one error by a long life of industry and integrity. Louis and Cécile closed his eyes after nursing him through his illness.

Is it necessary to add that the orphan married Mérindol six months after their departure from Paris? The marriage, which Nalot had striven so hard to effect, thus became an accomplished fact; but he was unable to reap any profit from it. Mérindol had certainly loved poor Gabrielle, but he had not loved her long, and

his heart soon opened to a deeper and more sensible affection. Cécile shared this love, which was disinterested on either side, for she and Louis were both poor.

Wealth came at last, however; for the Marquis de Mérindol, as an engineer, won both fame and riches in the country of his adoption. He has just re-purchased the land that formerly belonged to his ancestors, and he is having the old château restored. Piganou, who has become an octogenarian, is hale and hearty yet, and superintends the repairs with untiring zeal. He hopes to live long enough to receive his master next autumn, and he has quite ceased to regret the assistance he rendered to the escaped convict in the Bat's Hole. Besides, such adventures are no longer to be met with in the forest of the Estérel. The penal establishment of Toulon has long since been suppressed, and only the old folks of the district remember the red blouses and green caps which made the convicts so conspicuous.

THE END.

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